

A portrait of a Native American man with long dark hair, wearing a light-colored woven headband and a beaded necklace. He is shirtless and looking directly at the camera. The background is a desert landscape with red rock formations under a sunset sky.

NATIVE SUN SERIES

APACHE
Sun

CHRISTINE CLINTON

Apache Sun

Christine Clinton

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"Thank you" is probably something you hear all the time, but today when I say those two words, just know I mean them... more than you know.
Thank you Rick Mora!

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Chapter 1

Smoke drifted into the sky in the distance, signaling that home was near. Bear Claw sat high on his mare, wearing a pensive look. His dark eyes darted to the east and the west. He had been tensed for days, and despite all that had happened, he knew it wasn't over.

The party was tired, and more solemn. They had ridden three days to the north, after two riders had come from the Chiricahua clan. They had arrived too late. All that was left of the clan had been chaos. The chief's body had swung from a tree, the men had been taken prisoners or killed, the women raped or taken prisoners, along with the children. The tepees had been burnt, the horses stolen, and all that had been belonged to the clan taken.

His eyes grew hard as he relived the chaos those bloody pale faces had caused. They had come into their lands, and tried to take their lands away, leaving destruction in the wake of those who refused to cower.

Few had escaped, hiding in the forest; some had drowned in the rivers, and some had been devoured by the wild creatures. The few who had given Bear Claw an account of what had transpired returned with them, fear in their eyes and hearts.

The destruction of Chiricahua had come mainly from stupidity. Chief Ulzana (Big Buckskin) was a distant cousin who Bear Claw remembered going hunting with as a boy. They would scream in excitement as they chased a javelina. They had lain with the same woman, introducing them into manhood. They had been friends for seasons, Ulzana seeking his counsel when he faced confusion.

And so, when the white devils began to court Ulzana Bear Claw had warned him. The rumors drifted to him of Ulzana's dealings with those pale devils, and he had first dismissed them. After all, he too made exchanges with them, taking what was of use to his tribe, and giving them what they wanted, in full price. He had a civil relationship with the white devils, out of respect more for him, than he had for them. His reservations towards them was not a secret.

Ulzana had shaken off his warnings and continued to do deals with the pale face devils. He had let those white devils into his home, sheltering them. When one of the white devils raped a maiden, Ulzana had finally struck, killing the man. This action had been retaliated in full force, discarding the supposed friendship. It was a lesson to be learned. Those pale devils were not friends. They were foes who were out to steal and plunge their lands.

The clan emerged from their tepees as Bear Claw led his men

through the gates. Gloom had suddenly hit the clan at the sight of the wounded. He gave orders for the wounded to be attended to, and for tepees to be mounted for them. Then he rode off, deeper into the clan.

"You bring bad news," Sparrow said as he got off his horse.

Sparrow was the oldest woman in the clan. All had forgotten her age. Her skin was darkened like the night, filled with wrinkles. Yet her eyes were powerful, and many were scared of holding her gaze. She looked weak as she held on to a cane. Seasons ago, in her youth, she had been skilled with a bow. She still was, but her bark was worse than her bite.

"Ulzana is dead," Bear Claw said.

Sparrow nodded. She had expected the news. "His Bride?"

Raven was pregnant with their first child. She had been one of the first to go into hiding in the forest.

"She's here with us," Bear Claw said. The widow had said not a word since they embarked on the journey. She mourned, but there were no tears. All he saw was a spark of revenge in those steel eyes. Her son would grow up a warrior, to avenge his father.

It was dark when Bear Claw settled down for dinner. There had been a lot of tasks to oversee to ensure that their guests were comfortable as they could be. This was a starting place for them. As he had addressed them, the clan opened its arms in an embrace to them. Those who wanted to stay were welcome, but they would live by the rules of the clan which had led to its prosperity for years. Those who did not want to stay were welcome until they found alternative plans with other clans.

The clan had gathered by the fire. The tension had drifted, and even those who had gone through the ordeal had settled down into a calm.

"Thank you," he said to the woman as the bowl of porridge was placed in his hands. It was warm, with a sweet flavor.

The Apache clan had about three hundred adults, with hundred children. With each day, the clan grew larger. Soon, the lands they occupied would not be enough for them. They would have to pack up their tents and seek better lands. The clan had first settled here when his father had been chief, and he then a boy. His father was long gone, and so was his mother, and Bear Claw was chief of his clan.

He looked up and took the jug of wine Juh offered him. Juh sat beside him on the lion skin.

"We should avenge his death," Juh said.

A warrior, Juh was strong headed. He went into battle with no fear, and with no thoughts, which made him foolish. A good man, grudges were however his downfall.

"We should," Bear Claw said, taking a swig from the gourd. The

liquid hit him, slapping against his throat, and he took another swig. He had been drinking since he turned fourteen.

"But?" Juh sensed his hesitation.

"Cowards we are not. The Chiricahua clan are brothers to us. Their blood was shed on our lands, just as the blood of many of our kin." He looked around the fire. The men. The women. The children. Dancing. Singing. Eating. He was a warrior from birth, right from his mother's womb where he battled, his birth had seen two nights before he was ushered into the world. He was born for war. Yet he valued peace.

The white devils who had slain his kin were stationed by the river. They were a small group, and could be easily murdered in their sleep in the middle of the night. But what would follow would be beyond their control. He would not take such a risk when the lives of his people were involved. The clan did not seek for trouble, but they were ready to fight when it came to their doorsteps. This was their way.

"They will pay one way or another," Bear Claw said. You did not have to cut the head off the snake to kill it; there were several ways to kill the snake that proved a menace. Revenge was something Bear Claw craved. Retribution against those who had slain his people. The opportunity would present itself and due price would be pay.

"To the clan!" Juh lifted his gourd.

"To the clan!" The others murmured.

Sleep was far from Bear Claw that night as he lay in the tepee. All was quiet, and he could hear the stirring from the teepee next to him. Yet, it was an illusion, for the slightest of sounds would wake a lad. They were ready for war even in their sleep.

He rose from the skin beneath him; he had killed the loin with his bare hands at fifteen and skinned it of its furs which warmed him in the winter. He emerged into the darkness; the fire long gone cold. Around him stretched shadows of tepees in the darkness. SnORES drifted to him, as well as the faint sound of those fucking.

Quietly, he made his way through the camp in the dark. He knew every turn. He knew every tepee. He could walk this path blindfolded and not stumble.

Two kept watches at the gates. Standing Oak and Spotted Owl kept watch. Spotted Owl was a few years younger than Standing Oak. Standing Oak had become a man last moon and was eager to please. They turned, despite his light footsteps and he smiled. He was pleased.

"You should be resting chief, you have had a busy day," Spotted Owl said.

"Should I," Bear Claw said, sitting next to them. "Anything amiss?"

“No, we see nothing, we hear nothing,” Standing Oak said.

Come rain, come shine, watch must be kept, for they knew not who their enemies were or when they would strike. A false sense of security, a day of feast with their guards down, could be their last taste of freedom.

“What troubles you? Do you think those white devils will come for us?” Standing Oak asked.

They would be stupid to attack them. The Chiricahua tribe weren't like their kin. They were calm, but when attacked, they unleashed the beasts in them. Their formidable strength had made them withstand raids by other tribes.

What ailed him was different. For days, he had been unable to sleep. He woke up in the night restless. It was an experience he was familiar with. A sign, as Sparrow called it. Whenever this occurred, something was bound to happen. He had thought the attack on his kin was what the omen spoke of, but yet it prevailed. This was not the end. Good or bad, he had no idea what the future was, but in most cases, the restlessness spelled doom.

Tomorrow, he would burn some wood, to cleanse the camp, to ward off any evil that lurked around. Many had drifted from the ways of the old. Even more believed out of necessity. He, son of Claw Skull, and chief of the clan walked in the way of the old. Yes, there were traditions he chose not to partake in, these were traditions he considered perverse, his father had not participated and neither did he. He bore a connection to the spirits, and he would be a fool to deviate from their ways.

A cry came in the distance. A cry of a wolf that sent a chill down his body. Something was headed their way. They had to be prepared.

Chapter 2

The stone struck the spear as Bear Claw sharpened it. Sweat glistened over his brown body as he worked. Tomorrow was a hunt, and there was an excitement in the camp. They were going after buffalos. And there would be a feast after the hunt. Food, wine, music, and women to warm the night.

Speaking of women, one was headed his way. Anika was a beauty. She was tall, with a curvy figure and heavy bosom that made men stare. He had considered her a sister when she had been younger, but she had always seen him as a man. Now that she was older, her eyes were set on him.

He knew there were jokes about him being celibate, but Bear Claw liked women. He liked fucking, but he had been raised in his father's discipline. "Women are to be caressed and loved. They will bring you pleasure. And a home. They can also bring a man downfall." For many men had allowed their lust control them, and cloud their judgements. These men were no more, a spear in their heart.

He had his own rumble in his tepee, but his control always prevailed, for a man without control was a dead man. He held an esteemed position. One of power and authority, which made the females of his tribe want to share his furs. He needed a wife, one to build a home for him, to continue his lineage. He was thirty, and at his age, his father had had three daughters already. Yet he waited, clinging on to visions that would make others think he was mad. These visions had held him back from choosing a wife, for he feared betraying them.

"You work hard, without rest," Anika said. She handed him a gourd of fresh water from the spring.

"I am chief. I lead by example," Bear Claw said. A lazy leader created room for unrest and liberties.

"I should come to your bed tonight," Anika whispered, pressing her body to his. The scent of sandalwood drifted to him. He was a man and he responded. A smile spread on her lips. "Tonight Chief."

His rebut that she not come to his bed disappeared as a horse raced into the camp. On it was Long Feather, one of the scouts to the north.

"Wagons! Two wagons!" He said breathlessly.

Bear Claw smiled, a rare sight. And an opportunity.

"Juh!" he called to his friend as he untied his mare from the fence. He sat astride, his spear in hand, his bow and arrows on his back. He was met with five of his men at the gates. They were solemn,

but excitement tingled in their eyes.

His mare set off, and the others followed. The trail would take them hours to arrive there, but the scouts had spotted it from a distance. Two wagons, Long Feather had said. It was an easy target, two wagons which would be easily raided. If there was any resistance, it would be easily squashed as well. The trail was one of the least used ones, and then, it was a rare sight to see two wagons; the travelers were not wise, failing to see strength in numbers.

Raids were a norm for the tribes that felt aggrieved in some way. Their people had been attacked, innocent blood had been shed, and retributions would be made. On these raids, those who resisted were slaughtered, and they carted away the horses, food, and any material they considered useful to their clan. There were fruitful raids, like the one that had occurred years ago. It had been a bountiful harvest, with beautiful breeds of horses carted away. His mare, was a reward from that raid.

He lifted a hand, and all halted. From the spot he stopped, he could see the wagon in the distance below, headed towards them. There was no other in the miles that stretched on. This was not a trap, he assured himself. He pulled on the reins, and the horse took to the wind.

His heart raced in excitement; one he could not comprehend. He felt it in his guts that he was doing the right thing. He could have dismissed the raid when Long Feather brought the news. The wagons didn't seem like they carried anything of value. The horses looked poorly fed. It was probably a simple trader and his family heading west. A doctor perhaps. Yet, from the moment the news of the wagon had been told to him, something raged in him. The spirits called on him to go on the raid, and he followed their call.

*

The wagon tilted to the side as it probably kicked against a stone. Hannah held tightly to the basket on her lap. She breathed deeply as the wagon regained its stance. She hated this journey! She wished they had never come on it. An adventure, her mama had said, but it was turning out to be hell. For weeks now, they had been on the road, riding to the West. Their destination was California, where Samuel believed he would have a fruitful ministry, as a missionary.

"Hiyaaaa!" Samuel called from the front of the wagon, striking the poor horse. She feared for what would happen when the horse collapsed. It was inevitable with how poorly it was fed. Samuel was of the belief that the good Lord would provide. Out here with no one else in sight.

"He will take us to paradise," a soft voice said.

As if she had read Hannah's doubts, her mother tried to comfort

her. Hannah's eyes lifted to the woman who had birthed her. Regina had always been a feeble woman, left with a four-year-old daughter, after the death of her husband. For most of her life, Hannah had cared for her mother, protecting her from the harsh realities of life. Then she had met Reverend Samuel, a widower, who had two children, Thomas and Mary. She had opposed the relationship, because she had seen Samuel as a manipulator, who heard nothing from God, but Regina had been in love.

It was this love that had made her marry Samuel. The same love that had made her bear his child which now suckled on her, on a journey they had no idea how long it would last. The love had made Regina leave her home to follow her husband on this adventure towards the wild lands to an unknown land. Just as the Israelites had followed Moses, her stepfather was fond of saying.

Hannah turned away from her mother. Her anger strengthened each day they were on this path. It was because of her they were out here, in the middle of nowhere. Worse, Regina was sick. She had developed a cough that made her lungs rattle every time she coughed. It had started two weeks ago, and it only grew worse. Her brother, John, cried every day, and had managed to survive a fever. He was still warm, and she feared for what would happen if the fever returned.

Their supplies were thinning, and they had to ration their meals, although she had caught Samuel eating in the middle of the night. He had patted his stomach and said, "The head of the home needs to be nourished". She was angry with him for bringing them on this journey. If they did not find any form of civilization in a few days, she feared they would all die from hunger, mauled by wild animals, or worse, from the wild Indians, who she had heard terrible tales of.

Regina's body shook as she coughed. The sound made Hannah wince. They would set up a fire when they set camp in hopes that the warmth would help her. She carefully stood up, dropping the basket which had her balls of yarns and pins.

"Get back in there lass!" Samuel yelled, throwing his eyes at her, before they looked back on the road.

The road ahead made Hannah gulp. Desolation was all around. Anything could happen to them, and no one would know. She gulped. "We should stop. Mother is tired, you should be as well."

"I am not tired! We must get to a town by nightfall!" Samuel said, as he struck the horse with a whip.

A town? There was none out here! He was just so stubborn. He listened to no one but himself. "We have been riding for days and have—"

"Shut up lass and get back in there! I don't have the time for

your ramblings!" Samuel shot.

She glared at him. He treated her with disrespect, while she tried to respect him. After all, he was her mother's husband. A glint caught her eyes and she stared at the mountains. A shudder ran through her body, and she hurried back into the wagon.

"What is it?" her mother asked.

Her hands shook as she carried the basket. "Nothing," she mumbled. It was just her imagination, but for a moment it felt like she had seen something. A horse? A face? Whatever it was, it had been watching them. Despite being covered by the shelter of the wagon, she felt unease, and felt a sense of being watched. One thing was clear, they were not alone.

"We should go faster. See if there's a town around," she said.

"Now the lass speaks well!" Samuel said from the front, as the horse's pace increased.

They didn't know their way around the terrain. All they followed was the trail. Her eyes closed as she made a quick prayer. She prayed for their path to be guided to safety. But as she opened her eyes, that feeling of forbearing returned. It had begun when they first started this journey, and she had hugged Penny Sue, her best friend like she was never going to see her again.

"Mama..." she said in a tiny voice, looking at her mother.

"Yes Hannah. Is everything..."

The first alarm came as the wagon lurched forward in an alarming speed. Then came a cry from Samuel.

"Barbarians! They are after us!" he yelled, as he struck the horse.

Hannah shoved her head outside the wagon and gasped. Samuel was right. Like lightning, their horses leapt, headed towards them from the mountains. She had never seen them before, but she had heard dreadful tales of these strange beings.

"Faster papa!" Mary cried from behind the wagon, her face going pale with fear.

"Fetch the shotgun Thomas!" Samuel yelled.

Thomas hurried to the back of the wagon and pulled two shotguns. He threw one at his father, a silly move, as Samuel was a horrible catch. The gun sailed out of the wagon.

"Idiot!" Samuel swore.

Now the riders were on to them. Fear flashed in Hannah's heart at the first sight of them. They were so... big... and scary on their horses. They were barbarians like the tales said. They wore no shirts, and she looked away from their chests.

Everything happened so fast, Hannah had no idea what really happened. Samuel grabbed the shotgun from Thomas and shot. The

barbarians must have attacked because the wheels to the wagon let loose and the wagon detangled from the horses. She reached for her mother, pulling her into a protective embrace just as the wagon fell to the ground.

There were more gunshots, and she heard Samuel shouting. And then his screams. Her eyes closed as her heart raced in fear. They drank people's blood, she had heard. And they ate human flesh, she remembered.

Mary yelled as the tent was lifted off them.

"Nothing here!" It took her a moment to clearly understand the words said in the heavy accent.

Her eyes flung open as heavy hands settled on her. While Mary screamed, she stared in shock into the face of a barbarian. He didn't look different from the humans she knew. His skin was brown, and there were paintings under his eyes, but... he was human. And then he opened his mouth, sneering at her. She tried to pull away from him, but he grabbed her.

"Mama!" she cried as another of them grabbed her mother and brother.

She struggled as her captor led to where Samuel knelt. She gasped. Her stepfather had been hurt. His eye swelled, and there was blood spluttering from his nose.

"You!"

Hannah took a step back as she turned to a man. He was bigger than her captor. She had seen him lead the attack on the wagon. He was... beautiful, was the first word that came to her mind. He was tall, just like the other barbarians, his brown skin seemed to glisten under the sun. His chest bare, a necklace hung from his neck, with a white object. She gulped as she realized what it was. It was a tooth. Of a human?

"You are the one," the barbarian said taking a step towards her.

She wrestled against the other's hold but he was firm. With every step the barbarian took towards her, her heart pounded, threatening to explode. He stood before her, she flinched, turning away as he caressed her face. His hands were rough, but warm. He lifted her face, and she stared into dark eyes.

"The spirits are cruel," the barbarian said.

"Chief?" the man holding her said.

He was a chief? The chiefs were said to be murderers. They were vicious and took from her people.

"We have nothing to give you! We are merely missionaries!" Samuel spat.

"Nothing!" a barbarian kicked against the wagon. All their belongings had been tossed into a pile. Most of it were Bibles, and

religious books Samuel hoped to sell when they got to California.

“There’s nothing here!” one of the barbarians joined them. He wore a scowl. “No food! No jewelry! No gold! Dead horses! Nothing!”

The chief grinned, making him the most handsome man Hannah had ever seen. “We found something!” Then louder he announced, “She comes with us!”

“No!” her mother cried as the chief lifted her, flinging her over his shoulder. Her weak punches on his back were useless. She struggled but his hold was firm.

“Mama!” she cried.

Her mother stood up to go to her, but was held back by one of the barbarians.

“Let me go!” Hannah yelled as she was placed on a monster horse, facing the barbarian. He ignored her, and in a language, she did not understand, the horse set off. She pulled away from him, falling off the horse, and everything went dark.

Chapter 3

Bang! Bang! Something throbbed in her head as a fierce pain overwhelmed her. Her throat was parched, like she had been starved of water for eons. Her eyes opened, with a wince at the pain in her head. She was staring at the ground. It was in that moment she realized she was moving. On a horse.

Her memories returned, and she jolted. A firm grip held her down, and as she struggled, she realized with fear that her hands were tied behind her back.

The wagon. Barbarians. Her mother. The brute. She struggled harder. She yelped into a cloth over her mouth as she was pulled up from where she lay over the horse. Now, she sat on the horse, staring right at the muscled chest of a barbarian.

Hannah gulped as her eyes drifted up to his. It was him. The barbarian who had kidnapped her, placing her on his horse. Her attempts to punch him were useless, her hands were tied firmly by the binds.

“Let go of me barbarian!” Her words came out muffled. She glared at him, but his lips tilted in a grin.

“You can scream all you want, no one will hear you. No one will come for you,” the barbarian said in surprising clear English.

As she looked around the terrain, dread overwhelmed her. He was right. They were in the middle of nowhere. The bare lands seemed to go on forever, with surrounding mountains. There were no wagons. No humans. Not even animals, except for the circling birds, curious about them. They were alone.

Her shoulders relaxed, not in defeat, but in acceptance of her situation. What did he want with her? Why had he taken her? Not her stepfather, her mother, or her stepsiblings? She was of no value to him. Her entire family was of no value. They had no money or jewelry to give them, they knew this since they had ransacked the wagons.

Unless... she gulped. They wanted to feast on her. Perhaps the rumors were true that they were cannibals. But she was a bonny lass, and had gotten even skinner since they set on the journey. If they wanted a good meal, they would have taken Samuel with them.

Or... her blood ran cold at the thought. These were savages who had no morals. They raped and killed women. There were horrendous tales about this. What if they wanted to do the same to her? These huge monsters would defile and kill her! She struggled with a new strength. She would rather die, than have them lay their filthy hands on her. Never!

She squealed into the bind over her mouth as the barbarian grabbed her, holding her firmly down. His dark eyes frowned at her, and her heart raced in fear.

“You fell off the horse and hurt yourself. I will not let you do that again. If I have to tie you and pull you behind the horse I will do so,” the barbarian said slowly.

She could tell he would do as he said. She was already tired, had fallen unconscious when she hit her head. She was hungry and thirsty. The last thing she wanted was to be tied to a horse. She nodded. She would remain calm. For now.

She knew this was a great opportunity to escape. Before they got to their destination where they would hurt her, but where would she escape to? She did not know where they were. Out here, she had no food or shelter. Neither did she have a weapon. She knew nothing about the lands. These barbarians would track her down in no time. And the wild animals, they would devour her before night time. And what if another band of barbarians took her? So many thoughts flowed through her mind.

As much as she wanted to flee, she would remain calm. One way or another, she would escape. She refused to be hurt by these monsters. Her eyes closed and she made herself a promise. She would not let them hurt her. She would find her way back home, to her family.

She prayed they were well and safe. That no harm had been done to them by these barbarians. She could feel it, that they were. She would find them. She didn't care how long it would take, but she would.

She pulled away from the barbarian, putting some space between them. She had always been strong-willed, and had taken care of herself since she was a little girl. She would survive, and would not cower like they wanted of her. She lifted her eyes to the barbarian, who was watching her.

One of the barbarians called to him, in a language she did not understand. He replied back, with a firm look. The other did not respond, but she felt his hard gaze on her. She didn't know what had just transpired, but she knew the other one did not like her. She looked away as he sneered at her.

She wished she could just close her eyes, and when she opened them, she was back in Kentucky, in the little home they had all lived together. She had always wanted to explore, to travel and see new places, but not when it put her life at risk. This was all because of Samuel! Her fingers clenched in a fist. He had brought them out here in the middle of nowhere. Her mother had insisted on waiting till late summer when several wagons would be heading West; then they

would have had company and protection, but Samuel had insisted that he wanted to come West and establish himself before those folks arrived. Look where that had gotten them.

Her mother must be so worried about her, she thought as tears pooled in her eyes. She pushed them back; she could not be weak in front of these barbarians. They did not deserve her tears. I will come home to you mother, she said quietly.

She tried to open her eyes, taking in the surrounding, but it just looked like the same. She could not help but wonder how these barbarians knew where they were going. Out here, Samuel had gotten them lost several times. She reminded herself that they knew the land so well. Her eyes flickered close, and she tried to keep them open. But she was drained. She held back a yawn, but it returned with force.

“Sleep,” the barbarian said, pulling her to his chest.

Unable to resist, her head rested on him, and she let sleep lure her. A part of her hoped that when she woke up, this experience would be a dream.

*

His men were curious about why he had taken the woman. He had never done such a thing. Take one of them captive, needless a woman. He had ignored Juh's questions, who had been brave enough to voice the thoughts of the others.

Today was a special day. The shock rolled over him as he stared at the woman in his arms, sleeping comfortably on his chest.

She was real! And not a figment of his imagination as he had feared. Since he turned sixteen, this woman had appeared in his dreams. He had thought it to be a fantasy but he never dreamed of any woman but her. And every time he had been with her, she appeared real. Too real.

Shock had spammed through his body when he saw her in the wagon. For a moment he had thought he was sleeping. Bless the spirits. They had brought her to him. She was a white devil. He had known this in his dreams but she had been a guilty pleasure. In reality, she was the enemy. Yet he had taken her. There was no way he could have left her there.

He had been given the opportunity, what he would do with her he didn't know yet. How this would end, he had no idea. But he has followed his instinct.

She stirred in his arms, and he gazed at her face. She was plain. And fragile. She lacked none of the strength the women of his clan possessed. Her neck was gaunt and her body skinny. With how empty the wagon had been of food, he wondered when last she had a good meal. It had been foolish of them to be on the trail alone. If they hadn't gotten to them, another tribe would have, highway robbers or

wild animals.

She was not betrothed or married for she wore no ring. He had heard the exchange, she had been with her mama and papa. He felt no remorse for taking her away from her people. She belonged to him. Her family would eventually get to safety. Storm Cloud, whom he had left behind would make sure of that.

"The raid was in vain. We found nothing," Juh said in annoyance.

Yes, there had been no money. Neither had there been jewelries. But he had found something way more precious, the woman in his arms.

"We will soon be home," Bear Claw said, as they took on the familiar path that led home.

The woman stirred in his arms. She quickly pulled away from him at the realization that she had rested on him. She tugged on the binds and he gave her a warning look. He would not hesitate to punish her if she attempted to run away.

"Where are we?" She asked in a quiet voice.

He did not reply. Not that she would know where they were. She was a stranger in these parts.

She was quiet for the rest of the ride, tensing when she sighted the gates. She turned to him, fear in her eyes. He said nothing to comfort her.

The people looked onto him and the woman with surprise and questions. It was the first time some of them would see a white devil. There were tales of them, that they had long fingers, they didn't bathe all week, and that they are children; a tale used to frighten the young ones.

"Welcome to my home," he whispered to the woman.

He helped her down the horse, just as a little crowd had gathered. They were curious about the woman.

"Aiyana, have her cleaned up," he said, to his younger sister.

The woman hesitated, and so did his sister. But she did as he said. She gestured at the woman who followed her, looking around with wide eyes.

"Will you now tell me why you brought her with us?" Juh asked, falling beside him.

"Do you question my decisions?" Bear Claw asked irritated.

"I do not. You make decisions for the good of the tribe. But this I do not understand," Juh said.

"It is not for you to understand." He lifted a hand, putting an end to Juh's questions. He owed him no explanation.

*

Hannah had never been petrified as she was in her life. Her

body shook as she was led by a woman. It felt like a thousand eyes were on her. Eyes filled with hate and curiosity. She was in the enemy den, and she was all alone.

Just a few hours ago, she had never seen one of the barbarians, and now she was in the midst of hundreds if not thousands.

Tepees went on for what seemed to be miles, with several aromas meeting her nose. It was a communal lifestyle, with children running around while the mothers cooked. The woman led her through the tepees. She was regularly called out to in the language she did not understand and she responded in same language.

They stopped in front of a teepee. The woman turned around and she stared at her. She was beautiful, with long black hair Hannah envied. She frowned. She looked a lot like the man who had kidnapped them, sharing the same eyes and jaw. They were probably related.

By the side was a bowl of water. From a clothesline the woman handed her a cloth to wash herself.

“Here?” Hannah swallowed, looking around. Everyone could see her naked.

The woman folded her arms, with a challenging look. Hannah held her gaze. There was no way she was going to undress here. She was not a barbarian like they were.

With a huff, the woman entered the teepee and so did she. It was bigger than she had thought from the outside. There was a bowl of water and without hesitation, Hannah went about cleaning herself. She stripped out of her dirty dress and quickly cleaned her body. She heard the other woman going about and ignored her. She wished she had a tub she could immerse her body but this would do.

The woman handed her a folded pile. She stretched it and realized it was a dress, just like her torn one. Hannah gulped. Who had worn the dress before her? Was the woman dead? Or was she being kept a prisoner here?

The dress was a big, which was no surprise since Hannah was skinny. But at least she wasn't half naked like the women around her.

How was she going to escape from here, she wondered as they made their way through the tepees once again. The whole place felt like a maze. Tears welled in her eyes. She was very far away from home. In a strange land and amongst strange people who would hurt her.

Her stomach growled as they approached a gathering. Aroma drifted to her, and she realized she had barely eaten anything all day. Over a fire, an animal roasted. It seemed to be the happiest thing she had seen all day.

He stood out. The man who had taken her. He sat at the end of

the gathering yet all focus seemed to be on him. His eyes lifted and met hers. A tingle spread through her body as his eyes raked over her.

The other woman tugged at her, breaking whatever connection their gazes had created. She pulled her towards the man.

“Seat!” The man said, pointing to the spot beside his chair.

She glared at him and he grinned. She could sense eyes on them, waiting for her reaction. If she resisted, she would be harmed for disrespecting their chief.

Everyone seemed to relax when she sat down beside the chief. He nodded and a warm bowl was handed to her by an older woman. She stared at the content. It was red and mashed, she had no idea what it was. But it smelled good. There was no spoon and she looked around. Those who ate fed with their fingers, like a barbarian. Her hunger outweighed her desire for manners and she dipped her fingers into the warm mush.

She moaned at the delicious taste. It was spicy. It tasted like yam but she was not sure. She ate the meal first, the most she had eaten since they set on the trip weeks ago. Her plate glistened in the dark when she was done.

One of the men said something, pointing to her and the others laughed. She didn’t care that she was being teased. They would do the same if they had to live on portions.

The animal was ready and her mouth watered as it was being sliced into pieces. Her kidnapper was served first, a large piece which he bit into. She stared at the meat greedily. She couldn’t recall the last time she had eaten meat. Well, Thomas had caught a lizard a couple of days ago, but she had refused to partake. Prior to that, meat had been a luxury.

His gaze met her as he thrust the meat at her. She was stunned, looking at him surprised.

“Eat,” he commanded.

It felt too intimate as she bit from the meat which he held, but she savored the juicy taste of the well roasted animal. She took a large chunk chewing on it in delight.

When she was done swallowing it, he trust the meat to her again. He kept on doing this until the meat finished. Her stomach was the fullest it had been in a long while.

“Do you want more?” Her kidnapper asked.

She shook her head. She had to control herself otherwise they would fatten her up before they feasted on her. The thought made her tensed, making her realize that she was amongst the enemies.

He shoved a gourd at her, and she hesitated before drinking from it. She was relieved when she tasted it. Water. Cold sweet water.

Her body relaxed after the heavy meal.

A cry went up amongst the fire and she moved closer to the chief. The cry traveled amongst the body stopping by the chief who let out a bellow. Then words began to flow in a song. She watched as their bodies moved in a dance with the song. She had no idea what they were saying, but they seemed to be having fun. They were barbarians, yet they had their culture despite how crude it was.

The people danced for hours, laughing and eating. The men danced around the women, pulling them to their groins, in a manner that made Hannah blush. They were openly lewd. The women turned to the men who caressed them, trying to steal kisses while the women laughed shamelessly.

She looked away. If her stepfather was here, he would be consumed with rage for the sins they committed. Her gaze met him. He was watching her and the blush intensified as he held her face, his finger hovering over her lips. Her body was burning. And there was a tingle in her legs.

“Sachem! (Chief)” someone called to him, and he pulled away from her. She was glad for it, because she was confused about what she felt.

The night was still merry when she left the fire. Following the chief who had gestured to her. Her feet dragged. She had no idea where he was taking her to. Or what he was going to do with her. Was he going to sacrifice her to the gods they worshipped? She had seen some totems around the camp.

They stopped in front of a teepee, which had intricate marks all over it. Torches lit the entrance on both sides.

“Come,” he said, offering her his hand.

She shook her head, taking a step back. He frowned and she gave him her hand, scared of what would happen if she resisted.

He pulled her to him, and she gasped as she was smashed against his chest. Her eyes boggled as his arms wrapped around her waist. Now she understood! He wanted to lay with her. She struggled against his hold. Never! She would not let a barbarian ruin her.

“No!” she cried, pushing away from him. It was even worse than she had thought. She would rather be feasted on like the roasted animal than allow this vile being who had kidnapped her touch her.

“You are mine!” he said with a glare.

“No!” she hit his chest with weak punches. She didn’t belong to him or anyone.

“Sachem?(Chief)”

He let go of her immediately. Her eyes widened. On what seemed to be animal skin was a woman. A naked woman. As she rose, Hannah envied her beautiful tanned smooth skin with high breasts.

She was perfection with beautiful shaped eyes and a well carved face.

Bear Claw snapped at her in words she could not understand, but she got the message. He was asking her what she was doing here.

The woman replied him, taking slow steps towards them. She didn't even bother to hide her nakedness. She stopped in front of Bear Claw and caressed his face, shooting an embarrassed Hannah an annoyed look.

Bear Claw pushed her away. He grabbed her cloth from the ground and pushed them into her hands.

"Wait!" he said to Hannah as he pushed the other woman out.

Who was that woman to him? She wondered. Probably his girlfriend with how confident she had been lying naked in his bed. With how gorgeous he was, he had to have a harem. Samuel had spoken of such. That these barbarians had several wives and concubines who they sinned with. She also recalled him saying the barbarians raped women who resisted them.

She went pale. Would he rape her if she turned down his advances? He had not hurt her since they got into the camp, but he had ambushed her family and taken her away. He was capable of hurting her.

She would rather die than let him touch her. For if he took her dignity, she had nothing else. Her virtue she would protect with her life. Her body shuddered in irritation. She had kept herself all her life, first because she had always been a quiet child with her head buried in books and looking after her mother.

She would escape from this place. She didn't know how but she would. And she would leave with her virtue intact.

The woman from before, who she had heard been called Aiyana returned. She wore a displeased look, like she was not ready to leave the fun so soon. She pushed Hannah out of the teepee, leading her back to where she had cleaned up.

The lights were put out as Hannah lay on the skin. The woman lay next to her. She made a good show brandishing a blade, which she kept in her waist. It was a warning. If she tries to run in the middle of the night, she would not go far. She may be a woman, but Hannah was not deceived. She was first a Barbarian.

The fur was surprisingly comfortable. It didn't itch her body and it was warm. Her eyes closed but she was unable to sleep. How was she supposed to sleep beside a woman who could slit her throat in her sleep?

Tears welled in her eyes and she pushed them away. She was exhausted and felt so alone. It had been a long and dreadful day, and she had not had personal time to process all that had happened.

Where was her mama and brother? Were they stranded on the

trail, food to wild animals? Had they eaten tonight while she had a stomach full? Were they even alive or had the barbarians killed them? She had been unconscious and they would have killed all of them including her baby brother. They were the enemies, she reminded herself. The woman who lay beside her. And the man who had brought her here. She could not forget it.

Chapter 4

Bear Claw ignored his sister as she rattled on about her responsibility. When she realized he wasn't listening, she stomped her feet like the brat that she was.

"I should not be looking after the white devil like she's a child! What do you intend to do with her?"

Like many, she was curious. In the two days the woman had lived amongst his people, there was a lot of curiosity about her presence. He had been asked by several people including his trusted men what he intended to do with her. How was he to tell them that's he had seen her in a vision? They would think he was drunk or he had made mad by the spirits. Only those who were in tune with the spirits would understand. And even then, she was a white devil. She was the enemy who had come to steal their lands. He was the chief of his clan, and it was expected that his mate would be from the clan.

The truth was he did not know what to do with the woman. He had acted on impulse in taking her. In the past days, he had been thinking of what to do with her. But the answer was not clear. The spirits seemed to have left him. He had barely seen her since that night, getting reports of her from his sister.

He could let her go. Lead her to the closest developed settlement and she would find a way to reunite with her family. But his heart ached whenever he thought of this.

The other was to lie with her. He wanted her. With her so close, he was tormented. That night, he had been about to take her. He had held her in his arms. Felt her pulse. And since then, he lay at night thinking of thrusting his sword into her. She looked fragile but he knew she would be able to take all of him.

The woman stayed indoors all day, talking to no one but his sister. Yet he was not deceived. He had seen in her eyes stubbornness. She was not going to accept her situation easily, but he would break her, for she belonged to him.

"You want her," Aiyana said quietly.

"I do."

"She's a white devil!" his sister spat.

As if he didn't know. It was clear in her pale skin. In her green eyes and the brown hair he wanted to run his fingers through.

"You can have any woman in the clan! Any woman! They throw themselves at you. Anika wants you! She will make a perfect mate."

Yes, she would. She would make his bed at night, and his home

by day. She desired him. And she had a body for passion. He had seen her naked when she presented herself to him. Yet, he desired her not. He didn't feel that hunger for her like he felt for the white woman.

"That woman will bring nothing but trouble to the clan. She doesn't belong here. She's not our kind. You are the chief and it is your duty to uphold our values. She has to leave!"

He stood up, hovering above his sister and she had the goodwill to lower her gaze. She knew better than to dictate to him on what to do. He was her kin, but he was also her chief.

"I speak out of turn, but her presence bothers the clan. You are not one to make sudden decisions."

Indeed, he wasn't one. His decisions were usually accounted for, and if he did not tell the people, they saw the effects of those actions.

"Where's she?" he asked.

The woman was not in the teepee. She couldn't have strayed far. An elder pointed him towards her direction and he followed a path. He watched her in her thoughts. She stood by the trees which grew thicker into the forest. Only those who had grown up in the terrain would find their way through the forest.

She quickly turned around as he stepped on a branch. There was relief in her eyes when she saw it was him.

"How do you fare?" he asked her.

"I want to go home," the woman said.

"Han... Nah..." He had heard her mother call her name.

"How can you speak English. My language?" she asked curiosity.

"My interactions with your kind since I was a boy." He was a fast learner and knowing the importance of understanding the enemy, his father had made him learn the language quickly. Only few knew he could speak the language well. To most of the white devils, he spoke the language of the barbarians like most of the clans. Their ignorance gave him the upper hand when they haggled. They considered him a fool, but his act not only gave him information about their dealings as they spoke freely, but it gave him a clearer picture of who these beings were.

She walked towards him, her hands clasped. "Please, I have to go home. I don't belong here. My mother. My father..."

"They are safe. My men ensured they got them to one of your towns."

She looked relieved at his words. For an instance. "How long are you going to keep me here! What are you going to do with me? Fatten me up and feast on me!"

He chuckled, tears running down his face. He had heard that rumors and it humored him every time. "Look around you, we have the forest with an abundance of meat. We have the waters for our fishes. We do not feast on our kind." She didn't need to know that there were some sacred sacrifices that required the skulls of dead loved ones.

"Then what do you want?" her voice has raised. "My family is poor. They will pay you no ransom!"

"I do not want your coins," he said, taking a step towards her.

Her eyes narrowed, and he realized how innocent she must be. It would please him if she was untouched. If he was her first and last, because when he had her, no man would ever be with her.

"You would force yourself on me!" she whispered.

He glared. He had never forced himself on a woman. He was not a brute! She gasped as he pulled her to him.

"Never would I force myself on you. You will want me. You will yearn for me. You will cry out my name while I pound my meat into you. I will never force you, nor will I bring you pain. Only pleasure."

She gasped as his lips met hers. Her body spilled for a moment then she melted, her lips opening to him. Her lips were soft and sweet of a taste her could not identify. They were plump and he sucked on them, groaning as he grew harder. She intoxicated him. Her warmth. Her scent. She moaned beneath him, her fingers hanging in a fist indecisive of where to be placed.

His tongue slid into her as he took her mouth. His fingers hovered above the hideous dress he couldn't understand why they wore. Just above her cleavage. And then he teased it, that swell.

"No!" she pulled away from him with unknown strength. She glared at him with anger, her lips swollen from his kiss. "You barbarian! I will never ever lay with you!"

He was shocked by her venom for a moment. He smiled. "You are mine Han..Nah. Soon you will lay in my furs. Naked. Begging for me." With that he turned around, frustrated as he returned to the camp. His breechcloth covered his groin, and he distracted himself with thoughts.

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Hannah had never been kissed before. Yet she knew not all kisses were like the one the barbarian chief had given her. This was the sort of kisses that doomed women. The one that left her knees shaking. This was certainly not the kiss shared between her mother and Samuel which always made her roll her eyes. It had been... Possessive.

She took a deep breath. His intentions with her were clear now.

He intended to violate her. Why? Bragging rights to his people? To embarrass her and her people? Or maybe he was just a cruel monster who violated young women like the one who had once worn the dress she wore. She was certainly not the first woman he would bring to his home to violate.

For days, she had stayed inside, basking in her situation, hoping that someday she would be saved. She had woken up with a realization today that no one was coming for her. Heck, Samuel would be glad to be rid of her. He had always considered her an extra mouth to feed and would have married her off if not for her and her mother's refusal.

She didn't know if the barbarian was lying or not about the safety of her family. Regardless, she had to leave here. Otherwise she would be violated and no one would stand up for her.

She had seen the woman around. The one who had been naked in his teepee. She snickered whenever she walked past. She and her friends laughed and pointed towards her direction, and she knew they were talking about her, but she paid them no mind. The woman could have the chief. She had no interest in him. He had threatened her with his words, and with his kiss, but she just wanted to go home.

The forest was all around them. And she had never been one for the outdoors. She had no idea how she could navigate through the dense woods. At night, she heard the howling of the wolves; they would eat her up. She needed supplies for her escape, she had no idea how long she would spend on the run before she got home. And a weapon to defend herself. A blade would do. It was lightweight and she should be able to use it, if the need ever arose.

She had been isolated for way too long. Now was the time for her to save herself.

Aiyana wore an displeased look when she returned to the teepee. Hannah however wore a smile. She followed the woman without hesitation when they went for dinner. The other women looked at her curiously. She sat beside them, watching what they did. A big pot was over a fire, and the women tossed vegetables in. These vegetables were scrubbed clean in a huge tub whose water had now turned brown with dirt.

Her line of gaze met some of the women who were now returned with clean water from the water hole. She could feel their gazes as she picked a pail, joining the group of women who left. Ada followed her, at a distance.

The women chattered, ignoring her. They might as well be judging her, but she had no idea what they meant. However she heard the mention of Sachem several times and the glances thrown at her. They did not like her. And she did not care. She would be out of their

head soon.

Her heart leapt in delight at the lake that ran through. It had a blue hue, that made it more beautiful. Clothes were spread in rows on the grass, with a clear path for the women to make their way through. If she could get to the other side, she was confident she would find her way to the nearest town. It was a great risk, venturing into unknown lands, but it seemed to be her only way. The gates were watched and it would be difficult for her to make her way through the teepees without being seen. This was the only way out for her. She could feel it in her bones.

For the next two days, the chief stayed out of her way and she integrated with the women. She was not new to chores, having done most of the chores back in Kentucky. As she worked, she hid things for her escape. She slid a blade into her gown when the women were done cooking. She wrapped some dried meat around a leaf which she hid in a corner of the teepee. She had to be careful because she was being watched out of distrust but at the same time, she had to leave before the barbarian turned his attention on her. She could tell he was busy as she never saw him around. In the mornings, he rode out of the camp, and returned in the nights. His sister barely bothered with her when he was not around, and she was left to her own whims.

She watched, waiting for the right moment. She knew it was just a matter of time she would have an opportunity, and she would slip away. Back home to be with her family.

Chapter 5

Most of the men went one morning on a hunt. They rode on their horses and left the camp to get fresh meat and do whatever they did. There were still a few men in the village on the outlook to protect the clan, but it was just enough leeway for Hannah to slip away. No one seemed to concern themselves with her.

The women readied for the fresh meat, while the children either ran around, or were kept occupied by their older ones. Fetching her bag from the tree, Hannah placed it in a basket and headed for the stream.

Her heart raced as she drew nearer. It had dawned on her that she was really doing this. Escaping. It was a dream she had clung on to for the past days.

There were a few women by the stream. She dropped the bundle of clothes and began to wash them. Slowly. When she looked up, she was alone. Hannah scrambled to her feet with her bundle of clothes. She looked frantically over her shoulders as she went into the water.

She gasped; the water was cold. And deeper than she had anticipated. It went deeper as she moved across, almost touching her chest. Her arms ached as she held on to the bundle on her head. She could barely see and she was scared about the creatures in the stream.

She fell on the banks immediately she got to the other side. Her breathing was sharp and deep, as she took long breath of air. Her eyes weakly looked across. She saw someone. Anika as she was called by the others. The woman stared at her basket of clothes, and then, she tipped it over, into the water. A chill ran through Hannah at the smile on her face. She was wiping all traces of her which was to her advantage. She didn't want her around after all.

Tiredly, she stood up. There was no time to waste. She had to be out of there before he returned.

Hannah made her way into the forest. It was noisy and full of life. She had no idea where she was going, but she headed north, hoping she was on the right path. The forest was filled with turns and twists, branches that she had to bend and trees she had to climb over. She stomped her feet several times to free herself of the ants. She swatted the flies away as they came for her.

Her dress was wet. She was shivering. She felt dirty. And she was very tired, but Hannah had to keep on moving. She needed to gain grounds before the night came. She didn't want to be out here in the forest when it was dark. Just thinking about it, made her gulp as

she hastened her steps. If night met her here, she was however ready for it. She would climb a tree to sleep. As much as she shivered, she could not set a fire. It would only call attention to herself by man and animals as well. She had enough food for three days, having eaten her fill before going to the stream. She could do this, she told herself. She was stronger than others thought she was.

Hannah walked for what seemed to be miles. She was tired. But she needed to keep on moving. She had lost idea of the time since she was kidnapped, but she suspected it was afternoon already.

The forest became less dense and she was able to walk through the rough paths. Her feet ached and she had hit a rock, her big toe now throbbing. She sat down for a moment and drank from the gourd of water. The sun had come up, and her face was now covered with sweat, strands of hair sticking to it. She felt miserable, but she would be more miserable if she stayed back at the camp. She would certainly not miss any of that lifestyle. Not even the man with the brooding eyes.

A snarl froze Hannah. Her heart racing she looked around. She had encountered some rodents like squirrels and rabbits who had run off when they saw her. And well, she had seen a deer who had ignored her. She knew there were wild animals in the forest, but she had been praying not to encounter one. All she had was a blade of an arrow. How was she supposed to use that to kill a bear? Or something worse?

She got up quickly, she needed to be on her way. She hurried through the forest, more like running if she had to be sincere, getting away from that noise and whatever it represented. She stopped for a moment, to gather her breath. Then she heard a snap. She turned around, breathing fast. She could not see anyone. But she sensed she was not alone. Something or someone was haunting her.

Hannah began to run. She ran into branches yet kept on running. She heard the snarl as it grew louder. She had been right.

Hannah threw a look behind her. She couldn't see anything. She yelped as she fell over a stone. A sharp pain pierced through her left leg. Her head lifted and she gulped. She was staring into the dark eyes of a wolf. It was big, with yellow eyes, and sharp teeth that sneered at her as it took a step towards her. She tried to get up, her body shaking in fear, but she had twisted her ankle.

Her heart raced as the wolf advanced. So this was how she was going to die. Mauled by a wolf in a forest in the middle of nowhere. She should have just stayed at the camp, she thought.

Her eyes closed as she whispered a prayer, making the sign of the cross. They flung right open at a whining sound. Standing before the wolf was the chief, with an arrow that had gone through it.

How? Was the question on her lips as her eyes closed, with her losing consciousness?

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It was warm. And there was a sweet aroma in the atmosphere. Had she gotten h— Hannah sat up, breathing fast. She looked around her and her shoulders slumped. She didn't even know if to be relieved or devastated. She felt both actually. Relief that she was alive, and sadness because she was back in the village. She tried to get up and winced, a reminder of her twisted ankle. How had he known she was there? The last thing she could remember was fainting from exhaustion or fear, or perhaps both.

She was not in her teepee, she realized. She remembered from the last time she had been here that this was Bear Claw's home. Her dress had been removed, and she wondered with a blush if he was the one who had removed her dress.

The flap lifted and her body recoiled. It was not Bear Claw to her relief, but one of the older women. She spoke to her, but Hannah didn't understand, however she got the drift as the woman placed a bowl in front of her. She stretched out her leg and the woman's hard hands wrapped around it. A menthol smell overwhelmed her as the woman massaged her ankle. It hurt so much and Hannah winced in pain. Hotness surrounded her ankle, and just as suddenly as it began, it was replaced with coolness.

"Thank you," Hannah said with relief. She could barely feel any pain after the massage.

With a lowered head, the woman took her bowl and left.

The entrance opened and she looked up to Bear Claw. He looked furious as his eyes set on her. She was in a deep trouble.

"Thank you for saving my life," Hannah said quietly. Still surprised that he had saved her. She would have expected that he left her there to die in the forest.

"You ran," Bear Claw said in a voice that held disappointment.

"What did you expect me to do? You kidnapped me!" she threw at him. All of this was his fault. If he had not kidnapped her, she would not be here with a twisted ankle.

"Because you belong here!" Bear Claw said fiercely.

Hannah laughed. Belong here? She did not even know him! She was not one of them. She belonged with her family.

"You took me from my mother. From my brothers and sister. And you keep me prisoner here! I don't even know what you want from me!" Hannah said.

"I want you. You belong to me," Bear Claw said as he advanced. She tried to move away but her ankle still throbbed. With few strides he was onto her. He looked down at her with anger. "You

will never run away. You belong to me.”

“I belong to no one!” Hannah threw at him. She was not some slave.

A grin spread on his lips, one that unsettled her. “You will be punished for your disobedience,” Bear Claw said.

She gulped. She did not like the sound of that. She had watched a few days ago a thief being punished. He had been flogged on the back in the presence of everyone. She would never be able to take such a pain. And the embarrassment. It was pure torture.

“You will do no such thing! I am a civilized woman!” Hannah said, summoning all her courage.

“You are nobody here. You disobeyed my orders. You ran away. You would have been killed. And you hurt yourself,” Bear Claw said. “Do you want a public or private punishment?”

“You will not punish me!” she glared. Certainly, he would not do such a thing.

She yelled as he reached for her, pulling her to him. She struggled, but her attempts were weak. “No!” she cried as he lifted her dress. What was he doing? No!

He held her arms down, with one arm but gently as she continued to struggle. Her face turned red as he lifted down her drawers. He could not do such a thing to her. She was a lady! No man had seen her that way.

“Let go of me you brute!” she struggled.

He replied with a chuckle, then held her down firmly.

“Stay still and accept your punishment, or I will make it worse,” he threatened in a steely voice that made her know he was not joking.

Hannah stopped struggling. Her breaths were short as she feared for what he would do. He was going to rape her because she had tried to escape? What kind of monster was he? She shuddered as she felt his hand on her. His rough hand caressed her skin, and she jolted, in surprise at the shock. She was supposed to feel disgusted, wasn’t she? But why did her heart race in excitement.

And then it came. Something she had never expected. A slap so hard it tore through her senses, a scream emerging from her lips. He had slapped her!

“What do you think you are doing?” Hannah struggled as tears welled in her eyes. No one had spanked her like she was a child. No one!

“I intended to give you twenty. Perhaps you will receive thirty more. Or would you prefer I do this in front of everyone?” he threatened.

Her body went still at the latter threat. It was one he was very

capable of. The thought of him doing this to her in public was humiliating.

The second slap made her scream in pain, as it spread all over her butt. How could he do such a thing to her, she wondered as a tear fell from her eyes.

“Pleaseeeee,” Hannah pleaded.

He responded with another spank. He ignored her cries, her pleading and her wiggles and continued to punish her. Every spank was worse than the previous. Her cries grew louder, renting through the camp as she sobbed like a baby. She counted in her mind, hoping that the ordeal would finally end.

Twenty! The last landed on her already hurting ass. He let go of her and she pulled away from him, her eyes red with tears, with flem from her nose. She glared at him with hate as she pulled her gown down. It was a mistake. She winced in pain as the cloth rubbed against her. It worsened the pain. She sat down. Another mistake. She gritted at the sharp pain that pierced through her.

“I hate you!” she threw at the monster.

“If you dare to escape, you will receive a worse punishment,” Bear Claw assured her. He turned away from her, leaving the teepee, and she burst into tears. She felt so horrible. And so alone. Perhaps it would have been better if that wolf had devoured her.

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Bear Claw was in a bad mood. Everyone knew better to stay out of his way. He was angry with her, and angry with himself. Why would she want to run away?

He didn’t realize he had said it aloud, as Sparrow answered him.

“Because you took her from her people. She’s a stranger in these parts,” Sparrow answered. “Imagine you were taken by the white devils. Surrounded by them. And had no one to turn to. You will run. Several times. Until you die.”

She was right. He would never stop running. And there was only one thing that could stop him. That he died while running. But this was different. Right? He had taken her for a reason. Because she was his!

“She will not come easy to you. She hates you for what you have done to her,” Sparrow said.

Then what was he supposed to do? He had not intended to hurt her, but she needed to be punished for putting her life at stake.

Ever since he left the village, he had felt a niggling sense that something was going to happen. He had told the scouts to be on alert, and the same he had told his men. He had thought her too feeble to escape. Too weak. But he had been wrong. He had been unable to go

on with the hunt and had returned.

He had searched for her, and headed to the stream when the women told him they had seen her there. Even before he got there, he had known that she had fled. There had been no traces of her clothes, all he had was the women's words. It was stupid, yet brave of her to flee through the water. But the forest was no place for his clan, nevermore a woman who was not used to the lands. He and two other had taken their horses and gone into the forest. The others had gone their separate ways, and he in search of her before harm came to her.

A tracker, he had followed her trail, and hidden in the shadows, watching her. But he had not been the only one to watch her. A lone wolf had watched her as well, interested in devouring her. He had followed both of them, and just before it could pounce on her, he slayed the wolf which was now being skinned by the women. He had called on the others with the bird call, and together they returned home with the unconscious woman.

He had been worried as he went into the forest. What if something had happened to her? It made his heart ache to think of losing her.

"She will continue to hate, but you must win her over," Sparrow said.

This he would do. He had taken her from her people because of selfish reasons, but he had to win her heart so that she would be with him. He was a brute, but he was not a savage. Women offered themselves to him, but with her it would be different. He would have to be vulnerable. He hated her kind; it was cruel fate that she was his destiny. But who was he to deny what had been decided by the spirits?

Her heart was closed to him, but she was a woman. The spirits would not give him a burden. He was hopeful that her heart would melt towards him, and so would her hate.

Chapter 6

Hannah could not sit down. And her legs ached, so standing was an ordeal. It was evening, and she had gone out to the village with a tearstained face. She was embarrassed, as people threw her knowing glances every time she winced. They all knew what had happened to her. She wanted to throttle the chief for what he had done. It was barbaric of him. But of course, he had no idea what civility meant.

Her attempt to escape had been ruined, but she was proud of herself and how far she had gone. She had been unconscious unfortunately, so she hadn't seen the way back, or if indeed she had gotten far. However, it was proof that she was not some weakling who would take whatever they did to her.

She would escape again. She was confident of this decision. She would continue to escape, regardless of the punishment or the humiliation, until she succeeded.

Aiyana frowned at her when she entered the teepee. She could tell the woman was angry that she had escaped. What had she been expecting? That she remain with arms folded until they killed her, or did whatever despicable thing they intended?

She looked around for her things but could not see them. She looked to the woman and asked for her little belongings she had accumulated since she was kidnapped. The woman spoke to her, but of course she could not understand her.

"You. Sachem," his sister pointed.

She frowned not clearly understanding what she meant. The woman left and she followed her. She led her back to the teepee she had woken up in. The chief's home. She noticed in a small corner her belongings. She knelt to get them.

"Leave them," the gruff voice said behind her.

She turned around to see him in the entrance.

"You will stay with me."

Her eyes widened. No way! He had to be joking. But his face lacked no humor. Had she ever seen him smile? Or laugh?

"I will not stay with you! It is not proper!" She knew here they lived without morals, but she would not be a part of it. Living with a man? Her reputation would be damned!

"You have no choice," he said.

She glared at him in rage. She hated him for what he did to her. For abducting her and keeping her prisoner.

"I hate you!" she stomped at him like a four-year-old. His face

blanched at her words, and he looked sincerely hurt. For a moment, she berated herself at hurting him, but then she scolded herself. He deserved to be hurt for what he had done to her. She owed him no sympathies. Or apologies.

He turned around and left without another word. She kicked at a pot, wincing at the reminder of her pain. He was keeping her close to himself so she would not run away. Smart of him, but she didn't care if his eyes were on her 24/7, she would find a way to leave this miserable place.

She looked around. She wasn't comfortable living in such close proximity with him. It unnerved her in a way she could not complain. She was going to stay out of his way, and he had better do the same.

Most of the people ignored her. She could sense their anger at her. While some looked at her with interest. On her part she ignored them. She went to the fire with a bowl for food, and the women ignored her, turning their backs on her.

"You will have to win their hearts to get their trusts," a firm voice said.

She turned around and gasped. The woman she stared at was old. The oldest person she had ever seen with wrinkles covering her face. But her eyes were bright, and intense, it felt like she could see through her. She had seen the woman from a distance, but this was the first time they would come in contact. There was something powerful about the woman, something she could not explain. She seemed real, but at the same time mystical.

"I have no need for that," Hannah said. She wouldn't be here much longer. She was hopeful that her mother would get authorities to come in search of her.

"But you do young woman. You do," the woman said. Her English was brief and slow, like she searched for the right word to use.

Two women came to them and greeted the woman with a bow, signifying respect. The woman spoke in their language and they fetched food, for her and Hannah who happily ate it. She realized she was hungrier than she had thought.

"They do not hate you," the woman said. "But they anger for what you did to their chief. You fled his protection."

"He abducted me!" She was furious that they were giving her the cold shoulder because she had been trying to get home. This wasn't her home!

"His punishment was mild on you. If it were one of the people, he would have flogged them for all to witness," the woman said.

She shuddered to think of him doing so to her. Would he be that cruel?

"I just want to go home," Hannah said, tears tingling in her

eyes.

“Patient. With him,” the old woman said, caressing her face with her thin fingers. Then she slipped away into the night, leaving Hannah with questions. What did she mean by her being patient with the chief? She suspected he had sent the woman over to try to confuse her, but she was smarter than that. Her plan to leave here was on.

She stayed around by the fire for some time, keeping her distance from him. But she watched him. He possessed a charisma that made people drift to him. Perhaps, if he weren’t her captor, she would admire him.

A yawn escaped her and she stood up. She headed for the teepee. She heard a footstep and turned around. It was the woman, Anika. She spat at her feet, shoving her aside as she walked past. The woman wanted her gone, unfortunately Bear Claw had come for her. She did not want any drama. She had no interest in the man. She could have him for all she wanted. But she lacked none of the understanding of the language to pass the message across.

However, she had picked up a few words which were used in their day-to-day communication. The language didn’t seem difficult to understand, but she had no need for it. She wouldn’t be here to make use of it.

She sighed in pleasure as she curled up on the fur. It was softer than the one she had lain in, in the past days. She was tired, her eyes quickly closing as she fell asleep.

Suddenly, her eyes flew open. Someone was next to her. A big bulk of a body with a spicy scent. It took her a moment to realize who it was. Bear Claw.

She turned her head to him and gulped. He was staring right at her. She could feel his hot breath. He was beautiful, she silently admitted, with those thick arched brows. The nose which looked like it had been broken several times. His long hair had been let loose, and now scattered over his bare shoulders.

“You can’t sleep here,” she said calmly, her heart racing.

“I. Sleep here,” Bear Claw said.

She sat up. There was no way she was going to sleep here. So close to him. It was not right! Just because she was out here in the wild unchaperoned didn’t mean she would behave like one of them.

His arm reached around her, pulling her to him. She gasped as their bodies met, his eyes staring intensely at her.

“Let me go,” Hannah whispered. Her heart pounded even more. She felt something strange. One she had never felt before. It scared and excited her. This brooding man was trouble.

“You will sleep here, by my side. Only here,” Bear Claw said.

“It is not proper! Where I come from—”

He silenced her with a finger over her lips. She gulped. Her heart felt like it was going to explode. What was happening to her?

He said something in his language like a curse as he let her go, putting some distance between them. But it was not enough. But where would she go to this night to sleep? Here was safer than elsewhere if she had to be sincere. Her back felt back to the fur. Her body was still, her heart raced fast. She was on the alert. He had better not try to do anything to her. She would scream at the top of her lungs and if no one came to help her, she was going to bite him. She might not be a fighter, but she would fight for her virtue.

Her eyes closed, but she could not sleep. Not when he was just so close to her, if she stretched her hands, she could reach him. This was so awkward. If it was his intention to make her uncomfortable, he had indeed succeeded.

“Sleep,” his voice filled the room when she turned for what seemed to be the hundredth.

How could she? He was not the one who had raced through the forest all day, was almost devoured by a wolf, and now she had another circling her even while she slept.

For the first time in a long time, Hannah slept well. Arms wrapped around, and she felt a great warmth that made her cling to that warmth. She didn't want to be cold ever again. Her eyes flew open and she scrambled, detangling herself from the chief. His eyes opened, piercingly at her. She wanted to yell at him, but she was at fault. Sometime in the night, she had rolled to his side of the bed. How long had she been there? She hated herself for enjoying the comfort. She could feel his eyes on her as she hurried outside. It was still early, but she was eager to begin her day, far away from the chief.

Chapter 7

Bear Claw was in a good mood. He caught himself laughing a couple of times, a sound that earned him curious looks. Why should he not be happy, he asked himself? He had woken up in the arms of a beautiful woman. A woman he desired. She had come to him sometime in the night, not of her own will, but her unconsciousness. He had not pushed her away; instead his hands had gone around her, pulling her to him. In that moment, he understood what a mate meant. He had felt his burden lifted, and a certain peace descended on him. She had remained in his arms for hours, until the cock crowed, and her distaste for him resurfaced. Regardless, her presence fueled his positive mood for the day.

"You had a woman ride you last night?" Hopi asked as he sat amongst the men.

The other men roared in laughter.

"I heard you have the white devil in your teepee. I heard no screams, or is she the silent type?" another man asked.

The men laughed again.

He shook his head amused. He would share no knowledge with them. They were brash, but he respected the woman.

"Tell us sachem (chief), is it any good with the white devil? Is she as wild as our women?" The women of the tribe were known to be fierce in bed, taking pleasure for themselves. He perceived the woman was not like that. She was innocent. Untouched. And it made him want her even more. This thing called patience was driving him crazy.

The men continued to ask questions as he left, roaring in laughter as they provided answers to those questions. He noticed Juh follow him. The man had not shared in the laughter.

"What upsets you friend?" Bear Claw asked.

"The woman does not belong here," Juh said.

"She does. She will be one of us," Bear Claw said.

"You want to take her? Lay with her?" Juh said with disgust.

"My plans for her are none of your business," Bear Claw said.

"But... What of Anika? She adores you," Juh said.

Bear Claw sighed. Anika was a cousin of Leaping Deer, and his friend was concerned about her. But he had nothing to worry about. "She will find a good man, and the spirits will bless their union," he simply said.

He climbed on his horse and rode off, leaving the man and his questions. He was not the first to ask, and neither would he be the last. As the days went by and the woman stayed in their midst, the

questions lingered, wondering her purpose amongst them. He had shared none of such plans with the men, nor his confidants. They thought she was going to be a woman he laid with and disposed of, but then he was not such a man. He respected women, more than most of the men, because of the women who had raised him. Others thought she was going to be used as a tool of negotiation with the white devils, but he had no plans of doing that. She was his. And it frustrated him that she treated him with disdain. How long would this keep on going? Before she finally gave into him? She was so close to him, yet so far away. Like one of those fruits his mother used to make when he was younger. She would warn him not to touch them, and place them right before him. Whenever he reached for one, she would swat him hard and he would pull away from all that sweet.

Sparrow had said to be nice to the woman and he would win her heart. Fortunately, he was a master of seduction, and although he barely used his charms, they still existed. He grinned as a plan formulated.

Hannah sat apart from the women, running her fingers through the freshly harvested peas. She looked up as he got off his horse. He called out in greetings to the women, who returned his greetings. Their attention was turned back to the steaming pots, but he knew they watched him.

She ignored him, her attention on the peas.

“Come with me,” he said stretching out his arm.

She frowned. “I’m busy.”

Bear Claw chuckled, earning a look from her. “Would you cook. Or explore?” Her eyes lit up, and he could see the thoughts running through. She thought to explore to see for herself the terrain for when next she would escape.

“Explore, but I have work to do,” she said.

He called out to the women to handle the peas. Understanding what he had said, she set the tray aside and followed him. She squealed when he lifted her by the waist, onto the horse. He chuckled when she glared at him. Then he got on the horse. With a slap, the horse took to the wind, the two of them on the horse. Yet, in the distance four of his men followed at slow pace, but if needed, they would come to his aid.

Her laughter joined the wind, and his heart warmed. He longed to hear that sound everyday of his life. She did not protest when his arms went around her waist, pulling her to him as he steered the horse. They rode through the lands, and she threw looks around, as if registering the land. It saddened him, her quest to leave, but if his plan succeeded, he would make her realize that she needed to stay here.

The trail went thinner, and was filled with more rocks, but the horse knew how to navigate through. Their destination was no stranger to the mare.

The land became steep, going lower. The air became cool, and a chill ran through Hannah. The sound of rushing water greeted them. She gasped as the horse stopped at a clearing. In front of them was a waterfall. It was small, but beautiful, torrents of water running down, on the rocks which had become divided with time.

"This is beautiful," Hannah said. She had never seen such a beautiful sight as this before. It was so calm. And peaceful here. He let go of her, and got off the horse, offering her a hand. She found herself smiling at him, despite being angry. She went off, towards the waterfall. She knelt by the bank, scooping cold water in her hands.

"Is this safe to drink?" she asked.

He nodded.

She scooped it to her mouth and had a taste of the cool water. It tasted refreshing. The water was so clear she could see the rocks and fauna underneath.

"We call this place claypan haven," Bear Claw said.

"And what does that mean?"

"Hidden. It is tucked away. Many do not know it is here. It is calm. Peaceful," he said with a distant look.

"How did you find it?" Hannah asked.

"My father. He brought me here," Bear Claw said. He told her the story of when he had been a boy. And his father had taken him out one morning and shown him the waterfall. He had been excited, and fallen in love. "I come here to think. When I need some time alone," Bear Claw said.

She saw the vulnerability in him. He acted tough, but this was expected of him as chief. He had a huge responsibility as chief. To protect and care for the hundreds in the clan. It was a heavy burden for one to carry.

"What happened to your parents?" she asked. She didn't think he would answer her. Not when he kept silent.

"There was a war. Two clans. My father died protecting his people. My mother tried to be strong, but she followed moons later," Bear Claw said.

There was sadness in his voice, and she held herself from hugging him. It must have hurt him to lose two parents within such a short time.

"My father died when I was a little girl," Hannah surprised herself by saying. "I barely have any memories of him. He was a big man, with an even bigger laugh. My mother was heartbroken, but she survived, but I had to look out for the both of us. She was like my

child,” she added with a laugh. She had played the mother role to her mother. From the moment she became aware of her surroundings, she had cooked, cleaned, and cared for her.

“No one cared for you,” Bear Claw said, staring at her.

He was right. She had always cared for others. First her mother. And when her stepsiblings came into the picture, she cared for them too. She had moved from her home into the wild west because of them as well.

“I am a big girl,” Hannah shrugged. But he sensed the hurt in her words.

She dipped a toe in the water. It was cold. A swim here would give her a cold. She was surprised when he took her hand, leading her to the waterfall. She followed his steps as he jumped on the rocks, leading them further into the running streams of water.

She squealed, wondering if he was crazy as he led her below the water. A chill ran through her body, as she was showered by the water from its source.

“What is—”

Her words stopped as he led them into darkness. There was an opening behind the waterfall. It was completely dark, but somehow, he was able to navigate them through it. He led her to a strange place, and she was supposed to be scared, but she wasn’t. She trusted him, a thought that niggled at her.

There was light at the end of the tunnel, and he turned right. She gasped. Light filtered in from above, through a small opening of nature in the rocks. But what captivated her the most was the small pool in the middle of the room. It was raw and rough surrounded by stones.

“Touch it,” Bear Claw said, relishing in the wonder on her face.

Slowly, she dipped a toe in the water. Her face turned to him with surprise. It was hot. “How?”

“There’s a source, but I have never found it. It heats the rocks, which warms the water,” Bear Claw said. He had tried hard to find the source, scouring through the rocks and mountains, but had not found it. Nature indeed was great in its way of creation.

“This is beautiful,” Hannah whispered. She imagined an old civilization once occupying these parts. Their lives had been simple, but they had this.

“I will leave you. To wash,” Bear Claw said.

“Oh,” her mouth opened in surprise. How had he known that was what she wanted?

It took all of his self-will to leave the bath. He ached to watch her strip. To see her lower her body into the warmth as it wrapped around her. Patience, he told himself, patience.

Hannah counted to ten before she stripped, her eyes on the entrance which seemed to have been carved from the rock. What if he tried to hurt her? They were alone, out here in the middle of nowhere. No one would hear her screams. And he knew this place more than she did. She could always go back to him and demand they return to the camp. But miss this? She had never been in a bath before. The idea of it was one she didn't want to miss out. This was a lifetime opportunity. She hurried out of her clothes and folded them, keeping them on the ground.

She sighed with relief as her body lowered into the pool. The warmth embraced her, spreading over her body, especially the parts that hurt her the most. She hadn't realized how much she needed this. There was no soap to wash, but she used her hands, running her fingers through her hair and body. Her eyes closed as she relaxed, enjoying for the first time in a long while.

A noise sprung her eyes open, and her head turned to the entrance. There was a lizard looking about curiously. It was a reminder that it was time to go. She sighed, wishing she could spend more time here. Would he bring her here some other time? Why was she even thinking of some other time? She wouldn't be here, she reminded herself.

She wore her clothes back, and although they stuck to her skin, she felt better than she before she came here. Leaning against the wall was Bear Claw and they stared at each other.

"Thank you," Hannah said.

He nodded in response. He took a step towards her and she swallowed. What was he—he touched her wet hair, running his fingers through it, and from the look in his eyes, he liked her hair. He pulled away from her and without saying anything, he led the way back. He wrapped his arms around her when they got to the waterfall, shielding her from the cold torrents. She giggled as the water still got on her, stepping over the rocks on the way to shore.

The ride back to the camp was quiet. But content. Hannah didn't have words to say. And so did Bear Claw. It was a peaceful calm, but a shift had happened that they would realize later, for the moment spent together had changed something in their relationship.

Bear Claw dropped Hannah in front of the teepee when they returned to the camp, then set off to attend to his duties that he had moved aside to spend time with Hannah. He was grateful for the moment spent with her. He had seen a vulnerable side to her. She was a woman who had given her love and care to others, but had not been rewarded. She was like him. As chief, he held an esteemed position. Some considered him lucky, and that he had certain privileges, but the sacrifices he made, supersedes these privileges. He worked hard to

protect his people, putting his life on the line. When they lacked food, he let them eat before him. He always came last in his efforts to ensure that they were hale and hearty. A leader had to sacrifice, and serve others, before being served. The spirits had given him a woman who understood what it was to carry a heavy burden. But now that she was his, she would never lack. He would love her, and give her all that she had never been given. May the spirits help him on his quest, he prayed.

Chapter 8

Hannah laughed as the children chased each other. Compared to the adults, the children were more trusting. They had first been curious when she appeared, wondering who she was. They couldn't keep away for much longer. They touched her hair, her skin, and had even checked out her teeth. She had also taught them a few simple English words, and was learning from them. Despite what was happening, they were children and they were curious and innocent. They kept her company most of the day.

One of them was her favorite. Ela (Earth) was her name. She was a beautiful child with dark brown eyes and long hair. She was so sweet, hanging around Hannah when she was alone. Regardless of the language barrier, she told the little girl stories, and she listened attentively, as if she understood. Ela (Earth) sat on her lap as Hannah told her a fairy tale about a princess, using her fingers for animations.

There was a noise and she looked up. Staring at her was Bear Claw. The little girl jumped off and ran to the chief who lifted her up. Ela giggled in excitement as he brought her down, taking her up again. He would make a good father, she thought. This was not the first time she had seen him with the children. The kids looked at him with awe and respect, and he was patient with them.

Ever since that day at the bath, they had come to some sort of understanding. Well, they respected each other, and she kept away from him. But they no longer fought. Not that it mattered, she reminded herself for the hundredth time. She had spent over a week here, and she didn't like how she felt. Despite the harshness and simplicity of their lives, she had come to admire it. There was no one looking up to her here. No one saying cruel words to her. She didn't have to work so hard to get a meal on the table. Their lives were simple, and they didn't crave for food, clothes, and other basic needs that people of her race yearned for. The people were content. Yet, she was not one of them. She would never be one of them. They would always look at her as a stranger, and eventually they would hate her, and cast her aside.

Ela scurried off as Bear Claw came to her. He stared down at her, and for a moment she wondered if she looked good. She had been wearing the same dress for days now, and her hair was matted. She had to be a sore sight.

"Do you want to go on a walk?" Bear Claw asked.

She got up quickly, and a grin spread on his lips, as he fell into line. She lacked adult company, as the adults were still suspicious of

her. With her no longer in Aiyana's home, she barely communicated with the woman. She knew the other women kept an eye on her. She always saw them watching her. But they kept out of her way.

They walked side by side. He the big and burly man, and she was small and a bit skinny. However, she had fattened since she got here. Their food was nourishing and in large portions. She was filling out in places she had thinned when they embarked on the trip.

These strolls were not new. It had become like a routine in the evenings when they walked, talking about nothing in general. But it served a purpose. He bared a part of himself to her. She saw him as more human, and not the savage who had taken her. Truth be told, she saw the people in a different light. They were called monsters and savages. Despite their crudeness, they were orderly and worked together. In the mornings, they woke up and went about their chores, the men hunting, the women cooking and caring for the children. Bear Claw as chief oversaw a lot of affairs, and the people listened to him, holding him in high regards. It was a civil society to say the least.

"This is for you," Bear Claw said handing her a small box.

Not one evening went by without him giving her a gift. The first evening it had been a box of feather-like earrings. The next it had been a rose brooch. She unwrapped the muslin and smiled as she ran her fingers through the wooden comb.

"Does my hair look that bad?" she asked with a grimace.

Bear Claw chuckled, and like she did every time he laughed, she stared at him. How could someone look so beautiful? She wondered.

"You might need to wash it," Bear Claw suggested.

Her face fell. "Umm..."

"Go to the teepee. I will be there," he said as an idea occurred to him.

As she walked to the teepee, she realized she was actually doing his bidding. The old her would have stomped her feet and disobeyed him. But she was curious about what he intended to do.

She had not been long in the teepee when two young children arrived with water, placing it in at the front. Bear Claw followed them, holding some leaves.

"What's that?" she asked curiously.

"To clean. Your hair," Bear Claw said. He gestured to her to tilt her hair back and she stared at him. Wait! He was going to wash her hair? That seemed too intimate. He lifted a brow, and she did as he wanted, tilting her hair, her mind telling her she should revolt. Her body went still the moment his fingers touched her hair. They were gentle, yet firm as he carefully separated her strands of hair.

He squeezed the leaves, and they produced a sap which he

caressed all over her hair. She closed her eyes as foams began to emerge, covering her hair. It felt so good, she thought, his fingers on her scalp in what seemed to be a massage. He hummed as he washed her hair, and her body relaxed.

His fingers ran through the knots of her matted hair, detangling the mess she had tried to control since she was captured. The comb swiftly ran through her hair, showing the effect of the sap.

“Your hair is beautiful,” Bear Claw said.

“Thank you,” Hannah said. This felt intimate. Too intimate. But who was she to turn down the offer he had given her?

He let go of her when he was done washing her hair. Her fingers ran through her hair and she sighed, marveling at how silky it felt. She sighed, knowing it would get back to being matted in a couple of days.

“There’s a solution to keeping it that way,” Bear Claw said, presenting a bowl of dark cream. The women rubbed it all over their hair, making it shine. They would sit in the evenings doing each other hair as they talked and laughed.

“What’s that?” she asked. It had a sharp but pleasant smell.

“It is made from bark of a tree,” Bear Claw explained as he applied the cream all over her hair, running his fingers through her hair again. His love for her hair had grown, and he could not wait to run his fingers through them in another time. He sighed at the thought of her that way with him. He was growing tired and frustrated. Every night she laid beside him, curled up at the other corner, trying not to roll to his side, he wanted to take her. This thing called patience was difficult.

He parted her hair into two sections, just like that of his women. She smiled at him, and his heart leapt. Just the littlest of favors seemed to make her happy. He smiled back at her and they looked at each other for what seemed to be forever. A noise out front startled them, pulling them away. It was a young lad who had come with a message, one of the children had fallen into a ditch.

It was late in the evening when Bear Claw returned. He was covered in mud and had to clean himself. The boy was saved, and he would never play in a ditch again after the terrible experience. As he headed out, in search of Hannah, he ran into Anika.

“Why is the woman still here?” Anika asked.

“My decisions do not matter to you,” he said. He was tired of her questioning his intention for the woman. This was not the first time she would ask, and neither would it be the last he suspected.

Her body pressed to him, the globes of her breasts swelling. He was a man, but he had no reaction to her.

“What does she have that I don’t have? What does she give you

that I cannot give you?" Anika asked, hurt in her eyes.

"This is not about you Anika. I desire her, and not you," Bear Claw said.

Anger flashed in her eyes as she pulled away from him. "You play with fire chief. She's not one of us, and will never be one of us. You desecrate our ancestors and the lives of our dead brothers and sisters by laying with the white devil."

He glared at her. "What I do is none of your interest. I am chief and I decide who I lay with." He would have been sterner with her, but a part of him still saw her as a little sister. But if she kept on pushing, he would make her realize that he had no feelings towards her.

Her words however haunted him as he went to sit by the fire. She was right. His ancestors would roll in their graves if he laid with a white devil. They hated them for coming into their lands to steal and destroy. It was all they had done since they arrived on their lands. His ancestors had fought to keep them away, and here he was with one as an intended bride.

His shoulders slumped. Why him? Why couldn't they point at one of the women for him to build a home with? He had never heard of any of the men, most of all a chief marrying one of the white devils. They were only used for a night of fun, to see if being with a white devil was different. And this was rare, with how seldom they came across a female white devil. The other reason was for exchanges when these women were kidnapped. But to marry one, and to raise children? Oh! He closed his eyes. He knew that there was a lot in store for him. The future seemed bleak.

He looked up at a shadow. It was her. She offered him a bowl full of food. He took it and reached for her before she could leave. He nodded beside him, and she sat next to him. He ate the porridge, tasting the spicy flavor.

"I have to eat," Hannah said, getting up. She had seen him over from the pot wearing a solemn look, and had felt like reaching out to him to comfort him. Now, she wanted to get away.

"Eat with me," Bear Claw said. He scooped a mouthful and offered it to her.

Her mouth opened and the morsel slipped in. Their gaze held as she ate it softly, the juice flowing down her mouth. His thumb caressed her lips, removing the juice, his eyes not leaving her. She was hot, but there was no fire. Her body was sensitive in a way she did not really understand. She wanted to flee, but his gaze held her down, as he fed her, morsel by morsel, while eating in between.

"Done," Bear Claw grinned.

Her gaze lowered to the bowl which was now empty and

glistened. "You didn't eat anything," she complained.

He patted his stomach. He was more than satisfied. Especially with the sight of her eating from his hand. "I am very satisfied," he said.

A flush spread over her face and she looked away. He had noticed that the slightest of compliments, or touches made her blush. Was she really untouched he wondered? The thought of him being her first made his nose flared. He wanted her even more than before.

His attention was stolen as a song went up amongst his people. He took her hand, amidst her

refusal and led her to the fire where his people gathered already dancing.

"No! I can't dance!" Hannah said. However, every night when she watched them, she could not help but nod to the tempo of the music, and wished she could dance like them someday.

"It is easy," Bear Claw said, pulling her to him. She giggled as he twirled her around. She gasped as she stared into the face of another man. He twirled her around, and her laughter filled the night as she went into the arms of another man. Now, she understood how the dance went. Just like the waltz. On and on she kept twirling, until she was back in the arms of the chief. She giggled at him in excitement. It had been fun.

They danced into the night, and Hannah let herself go. She tasted from the gourd and spat it out. The others laughed around her as Bear Claw clapped her back as she coughed.

"That was..." It had tasted harsh.

"Drink. Slowly," Bear Claw said, guiding the guard back to her mouth.

It wasn't as bad as the first time, but she still didn't like the drink. However, it warmed her, and made her feel free. Her hands lifted as she joined in the group of dancers. She laughed. She twirled around. She was happy.

She stumbled back to the teepee with the help of Bear Claw who was concerned that she had drank too much. He had tried to pull her away from the gourd but she had been adamant.

"You are good looking," Hannah said as she ran her fingers through his hair.

He chuckled.

"I like the way you make me feel," she said.

"How do I make you feel?" he asked interested.

"Warm," Hannah said, staring at him. He looked even more dashing tonight. "I should hate you. For taking me. But I don't. Why don't I?" she wondered aloud in her drunken state.

"You must rest your head," Bear Claw said.

“No, I don’t want to sleep. I want to run. Ride a horse. Jump!” she said, as she attempted to scramble out of the teepee.

He pulled her back, holding her to himself. She stared up at him with beautiful eyes. He froze as her fingers caressed his lips. They went lower, caressing his chest. She was causing him to be hard as a rock. There was desire in her eyes, but not in this state when she was not in control of her senses. She would loathe him if she woke and he took her.

Her hands were around his neck as he lowered her to the fur. She refused to let him go and he had to carefully pull away from her hold. There would be no more wine for her, he decided. As much as he liked seeing her free without inhibition, he preferred her being her normal self.

He dropped his weapons then lay on the fur, away from her, just like most nights. He closed his eyes to sleep, opening them when he felt Hannah by his side.

“I like sleeping next to you,” she drawled, her fingers running through his hair. “And your hair. I like it. I want to wash it someday.”

He smiled. He liked her sincerity. Despite the front she put up by day, she felt something for him, no matter how little it was. He pulled her to him, and she rested her head on his chest. He felt whole. This was where she belonged, and he would fight to keep her here.

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Hannah groaned as her eyes opened. It felt like a hammer slammed back and forth in her head. The pain was horrible. Her eyes squinted close and despite the flaps was closed, it was too bright. She knew it was morning, but it felt like she had not slept at all. Traces of last night drifted to her. Her dancing. Her drinking and laughing with the people. There was a faint memory of her trying to kiss Bear Claw. Or was that her imagination? She groaned as she sat up. She was never drinking again.

She staggered up, feeling nausea as she steadied herself. A hand lifted over her face as she stepped into the morning. The women had begun to cook, the children were being awakened, and the men were in groups mapping out the day’s activities. Her stomach lurched and she went to a corner to let it all out. There was a rub on her back and when she looked up it was a young woman her age who smiled tenderly at her.

The woman led her to a gathering of women. Her eyes widened in surprise as they called greetings to her, some patting her. Had she woken up in a strange place? A gourd of warm liquid was handed to her and she drank it. She spat it out, earning laughter from the women, one of them falling off a tree stump. The young woman who had introduced herself as Black Raven gestured at her to drink it

slowly. She did, but it didn't stop the liquid from tasting better. However, in a few minutes, she felt better.

For the rest of the morning, she sat with the women working. They involved her in their conversation even though she had no idea what they were clearly saying, although she could read meaning to some of their words. What had happened overnight to cause such a shift, she could not help but wonder. She retraced her memories, but could arrive at nothing. She shrugged, giving up. Rather, she would make the most of their warmth towards her.

Bear Claw found her. He arrived at the site and as usual, all eyes drifted to him. He always stood out. He didn't even make an effort. Her face turned red as traces of last night flooded to her. Had she climbed on him? What else had she done to him? Or asked of him? As his grin widened, she got more embarrassed.

"How do you feel?" Bear Claw asked. Unfortunately he had risen early, and had not been there to see her wake. But the women had taken care of her, from what he saw.

"I am never going to drink again," Hannah said.

Bear Claw spoke aloud to the women, and they all laughed. She guessed he had told them of her new resolution. Prior to last night, she had taken a sip of wine and nothing more, that had no effect on her. But this drink had been very potent.

"And you drink that everyday," she said.

"We are used to it. We begin to drink it from the moment we stopped suckling," Bear Claw said.

"About last night..." She glared at him as he chuckled. There was nothing funny about the situation. She was curious about what had happened. She had questions.

"Nothing happened," Bear Claw said, becoming serious. He had never taken a maiden with force.

She was relieved. It was just a confirmation. She doubted he would force her. Would he? Even though he had kidnapped her, and had been cruel to her, she didn't think he would force himself on her. Yet she did not trust him.

"Did I do anything?"

He smiled. "You tried to... Kiss me."

Her eyes widened. No way! She felt awful. How could she have done that. He chuckled as she covered her face. No drinks anymore in her life, she decided. How could she have done something like that?

"I am sorry," she apologized.

"It is said that liquor reveals your deepest wants," Bear Claw said, watching her flush even more.

"I..." She said nothing more, looking away. She willed the ground to open up and swallow her. Of course, she didn't want to kiss

him. She had been drunk.

Someone called out to him and she was glad when he stood up. She needed a breathing space. But that was not the end.

"I will be willing for that kiss whenever you are," Bear Claw said.

Her eyes widened and she turned away. She didn't know if he was teasing her. But was he? He had never hidden the fact that he was attracted to her. She watched as he walked away. She didn't know what desire felt like. She had never lain with a man. But she used to read books written by the female librarians. Romance books of men and women who fell in love and did things married people used to. When she read those books, she had felt warm. She had stopped reading them when Samuel carted them away, calling them sinful tools right before burning them into ashes. Yet, the memories remained with her. As much as she had been the one who had fended for her and her mother, she had lived a rather closeted life when it came to men. She'd had a few callers, but she had always been too busy to attend to their feelings for her. Samuel had intended to marry her off when he got married to her mother, to a young missionary who looked just like him. Thankfully, it was the first, and probably the last time her mother stood her ground, insisting that Hannah wasn't ready for marriage. The few times she had spent with that young missionary, he had not caused such a stir in her like the savage did.

Her feelings confused her. And they scared her. How could she feel such for a man who had kidnapped her? She was supposed to hate him. The sooner she left here, the better it would be, and her strange feelings would stop, she told herself.

Chapter 9

“The people are warming up towards your woman,” Sparrow said.

Bear Claw had gone to see the old woman in her tepee. The woman sat surrounded by her herbs, and totems. She looked at peace. In her old age, he saw a bit of his mother, her younger sister in her.

He nodded. The hostility and curiosity still lingered, but it was little. But would things change when he made aware his intention for her?

“Do you know why?” Sparrow asked.

He looked to her, knowing she would answer without his response.

“She made you laugh.”

He lifted a brow. “I laugh.”

Sparrow smiled, she leaned towards him, caressing his face with her old hands, the smell of camwood which she rubbed all day over her body drifted to him comfortingly.

“It has been a long time since you were free. Since you let down your guard and let someone in. The woman made you laugh. She made you dance. No one has seen you that way since.”

Since he lost his parents he completed. He had thought he put up a good front, burying his emotions and happiness for the betterment of his people. He barely got time to indulge as his mind were always on protecting his people. While he dined, he wondered if adding extra men to the gate would be better. While he rode, he thought of the harvest they would yield. Barely, did he get time for himself. And he had accepted his fate. It was the curse of being a leader. To sacrifice all for his people. To choose another life was to be selfish and greedy, and he had seen too many of such leaders be destroyed by their people as well as their greed.

“It is good, that they like her,” Bear Claw said.

“How does she fare?” Sparrow asked.

“She fares well,” Bear Claw said. Women were complex beings to understand. White devil. Native Indians. They were all the same complex beings. One moment she was warm towards him, smiling and laughing. And the next, she was cold, eager to be out of his presence. He never could clearly figure her out. But what he did know was that she desired him, even if she tried so hard to hide it. He saw it in the little shy looks she threw at him. He saw it when she watched him, thinking he wasn’t aware of her gaze on him. Yet, she fought so hard to accept what it was between them. Was he that disgusting that she

couldn't be with him?

"The right time will come," Sparrow said, placing a hand over his.

He scoffed. He was tired of waiting for the right time. He wanted to be with her now. The flap of the teepee opened, and Rain Cloud came in. He was one of the lads at the gates.

"We have visitors," Rain Cloud announced.

At the gate was a small party, one of whom he recognized very well. It was his sister White Dove. She had left years ago to be married into the tribe of Arapaho, a marriage which had been arranged by his father. A union they all regretted. Her husband was the reincarnate of the devil, for he had abused his sister with his fists and his words. Several times, Bear Claw had tried to bring his sister back home, but she had been with shame, and felt she amounted to nothing, something her husband had caused. She had chose to remain in the dwellings of her husband. As much as Bear Claw had spited him, and had wanted to get rid of him for good, he had respected his sister's decision, for he who wore the shoe, knew where it pinched.

His sister had aged since the last time he saw her. She looked tired. Weak. Unhappy. She rushed into his arms, and his hands went around her as she wept. Anger whelmed in him. He should have removed the head of her husband and placed it at her foot. A sweet and kind woman she had been, but now she was an empty shell. He should have pushed harder and brought her home.

Aiyana, hearing the news of their sister's return hurried towards them. He let go of White Dove and his sisters embraced. He looked to the small party that had escorted her, and glared at them. They were made of mostly men, with a few women. None of them had stopped their kin from hurting his sister. They had let his atrocities go.

"Bear Claw, they are not to blame," his sister held his arm, clearly reading his thoughts.

"I will kill him," Bear Claw said.

"You do not have to. He's dead," his sister said. There was no sorrow in her voice. And he expected none. No one should feel sorrow for a wretched man like her husband.

"How?" he asked. Had his sister summoned the bravery to kill him? The clans did not take to such murders, regardless of the cruelty. Life was sacred to them, and war was the only valid reason for death.

"He was mauled. By his horse on the terrain," White Dove said.

"Was his death swift?"

White Dove shook her head, a smile on her face. "He stayed three days before he joined the other world."

He deserved to suffer, and Bear Claw hoped his suffering would continue in the other world, for he did not deserve mercy. He hugged

his sister again, grateful that she had returned home, despite her scars.

"Are we welcome here?" she asked.

It was in that moment he noticed that she was with child. His mouth opened. For years, his sister had been unable to conceive, only intensifying her husband's cruelty.

"How?" he whispered.

"Should she explain the intricacies of creating a child?" Aiyana asked.

A laughter rose from the crowd as Bear Claw felt heat creep over his face. He glared at his sister and her smile only widened. He placed a hand over her stomach, and the child moved. It was a boy. He could tell already. His nephew who would never lack for a father. It was well that the bastard was dead, for he did not deserve to be a father. Neither did the child deserve a father like him.

"You are always welcome here. This is your home," he said to her. He would never turn her away. This had been her home since she was born. It would always be a home to her and her child. And no one here would turn them away.

The gates opened, welcoming them in. He held his sister's hand and felt her shaking as she returned to the home she had left times ago. He could see the hurt and pain in her eyes as she looked around.

"I should have left a long time ago," White Dove said.

He caressed her hand. Yes, she should have. Thank the spirits, she had returned alive. Then, his vengeance on her husband would have been accepted. But he would have lost her. The living was better than the dead.

A small crowd soon formed in front of his sister, as many came to her to hug and greet her. For those of their generation all knew her, and had heard of her pain. The women took her away, and he watched her go. It was only then he realized he felt relief for his sister in what seemed to be a long time. He had always worried for her, and prayed to the spirits to free her. His status would have redeemed her, but Big Horn had been a scoundrel, the third son of a chief who cared nothing but enriching himself, then care anything for fairness.

She would stay with Aiyana for the while, while her companions would be camped for days until they were well rested. They would be provided supplies and escorted back home. Death had done good, taking the scoundrel, but there would always be a bond to him, in a child who would be raised by the clan.

He went in search of Sparrow, but he was told by her apprentice that she had heard of his sister's return and had gone to her. He knew the women had to be catching up on lost times. He let them be. He looked for a light-skinned woman. He was told that she was by the stream.

Had she attempted to flee again? He wondered as he went to the stream. She had to know it was stupid to go through the forest, especially with no escorts. He was relieved when he found her by the stream, washing her clothes.

Hannah looked up and met Bear Claw's eyes. There was an emotion in them she could not identify. She stood up and went to him.

"What troubles you?" she asked.

"My sister has returned." He told her briefly of how his sister's husband had treated her cruelly.

Hannah ached for the woman who had been hurt by the husband she was supposed to have trusted.

"He reminds me of my stepfather," Hannah said.

"Did he ever hurt you?" Bear Claw growled. He knew he should have hurt the man. There had been something unsettling about him. While her mother had screamed for her daughter, the man had been more concerned about his horses and those bound papers in the huge boxes. If he had hurt her, he would track him down and make sure he paid.

"Not with his fists, but with his words. He tried to manipulate my mother and I, and when he saw I was no victim, he tried to separate us." Just thinking of the wedge Samuel had created between her and her mother upset her. Her mother had always been a dependent, looking up to someone to care for her. She had done that most of her life. And so when Samuel came into their lives with his scriptures and nice words, her mother had looked onto him as a protector, instead of the leech that he truly was.

"No one will ever hurt you. I promise you," Bear Claw said, pulling her into his arms.

Hannah scoffed. "And you will protect me from you, if you hurt me?"

Her words made him frown. "I will never hurt you."

"Yet you kidnapped me and separated me from my family. Isn't that hurting me?"

Bear Claw let go of her. He was offended. He had no intention of hurting her. Yes, he had taken her from her family, but would she have gone with him if he had walked up to her and told her to come with him? Would she understand that they were meant to be? He had done what was necessary, but that made him nothing like Big Horn. The man had been a monster.

Hannah left him in his thoughts, returning back to her laundry. She considered it ironic that he worried for his sister who had been treated cruelly, and he did something similar to her. She ignored him as he watched her, all her attention on the clothes.

The village was lively when she returned. She guessed it had to

do with the return of Bear Claw's sister. She wondered how the woman felt, returning with a pregnancy to her old home after so many years of being away. Would she feel that same way when she found her way back to her family? Would she feel like a stranger, or like she never left?

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"There's no need for it," White Dove insisted, but Bear Claw had made up his mind.

"There will be a celebration for your return," Bear Claw insisted. Her survival and return home needed to be celebrated, and to pass a message to all who suffered. That their family would rejoice at their return.

"It should be a quiet celebration then," White Dove finally gave in.

All who were with them laughed, for there was nothing like a quiet celebration amongst their kind. They would merry into the night.

"We merry tonight!" Bear Claw announced, and a cheer went up.

"I heard you have taken for yourself a mistress," White Dove said.

They were taking a walk across the village. It reminded him of years ago when they were younger. White Dove refused to stay put and would run after him and his friends. Oh, how much time had gone by, bringing with it the travails of life.

"A mistress?" He was confused.

"A white devil."

It took him a moment to understand what she was saying. Ah! His people thought Hannah was his mistress, and that was the reason he kept her on. He laughed at the thought. He would never disrespect her, reducing her to the level of being his mistress.

"So you accept. I never thought you were one to take their kind to your bed," White Dove said.

"She's not my mistress," Bear Claw said.

"Then what is she to you? Why is she still here?" White Dove inquired.

It had not even taken a day for all that had been happening to be told to her. He was sure Aiyana had told her all that needed to be told.

"It is... complicated," Bear Claw admitted.

His sister's eyes rested on him, expecting more, but he gave her none. Indeed, it was too complicated, and as much as he trusted her, he did not know what she would say in the circumstances. She had a lot to deal with than the burden of his complicated relationship with

the woman he had kidnapped.

"I would like to see the woman, white devil or not who has my brother upset," White Dove said, a smile creeping on her face.

"I'm not upset," Bear Claw denied.

White Dove laughed. "No woman has ever had you upset. Or rattled."

"I am not..." His words trailed on, as he realized there was no need denying the obvious. He never took such actions. Those who knew him, knew this well enough.

"She means more?"

White Dove asked, with an intense look that made him uncomfortable. He had only shared the dreams with Sparrow.

White dove sighed when he didn't respond to her. She was his sister, yet he could not tell her the truth. Especially when his future with Hannah was not decided.

"If there's anything I have learned in all my years of being with Big Horn, do what makes you happy," White Dove said.

He would. For the first time, he had decided to be selfish and had taken her for him. He only hoped his choice would not hurt him in the future.

"We should head back. The feast will soon begin," Bear Claw said, guiding his sister back to the village.

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The natives knew how to throw a great feast. The littlest of reasons was used to merry, and tonight, there was a great reason. The return of one of their own. The women had cooked varieties of meals, and the aromas drifted into the night. The men supplied the alcohol, which Hannah knew better to steer away from, the memory of her drunken night still clear.

She sat away from Bear Claw and his sister, whom she had been introduced to earlier in the night. The woman had given her an intense look, and she had known the siblings had talked about her.

The drums were hit by the men in a rhythmic beat, while the women shook gourds that contained seeds. Their voices lifted to the sky as they sang in one accord. It was beautiful. Tonight, was about a reunion. They sang a song that she was not familiar with but the words were emotional. Bear Claw's sister cried silently, wiping tears from her eyes as she was pulled into a dance to join her people.

"The words are powerful."

She jolted, surprised to see Bear Claw next to her. "What do they mean?"

"The storm came, it takes the bird. To a far away land. The bird survives. It eats. It drinks. But it is not home. One day, there's another storm. The storm takes the bird back home. To his family. Finally, the

bird is home.”

She smiled sadly. In a way, she could connect with the lost bird. Yet, there was a part of her that realized that despite her captivity, things were not all that bad. She would never admit it out loud, but she liked the clan. Back home, things had been difficult, and she barely fitted in. She had always been the odd one out, and at a point, she had stopped trying to fit in. Here, there were no expectations of her. If she wasn't in captivity. If the people didn't hate her kind, perhaps living here would not be too bad.

“Do you want to dance?”

She hesitated for a moment. Then she looked at the people dancing, and she gave him her hand. The music overwhelmed her, and so did the emotions that drifted around. He held her closely in his arms, and they danced, their bodies close to each other.

“You dance so well,” she said. There were so many words she wanted to say, but that came out first.

Bear Claw chuckled. “And you are becoming a better dancer,” Bear Claw said.

She lifted a brow, not believing his words. They remained in each other's arms for some time, until someone called to Bear Claw. He let go of her, and she headed to their teepee. His teepee, she corrected herself. She should not forget that she did not belong here. Never delude herself that she was one of them. For she wasn't.

She lay on the fur but could not sleep. Laughter drifted from outside to her. She was full of excitement and life tonight, but she was also overwhelmed. She wondered what her mother was doing at the moment. Had they even survived? The last time she had seen her mother, she had been frail. What about her baby brother? As the people jubilated out there, she wished she was with her family.

Tears blinked in her eyes and she pushed them back. She had not cried since the first day she arrived here. Since, she had tried to be strong, but it seemed she had reached her breaking point.

The tears came out and she could not stop them anymore. Her body rocked as she cried for a home she never had, and yet she missed.

There was a noise, but she did not take note of it. Until she felt a presence before her. Her eyes opened and she looked into Bear Claw's face. When had he come in?

“You are crying,” Bear Claw said. He had thought she was sleeping, but then he had heard the quiet sobs. It hurt him to see her crying, and he knew he was the reason why. She wanted to go home. It hurt him that he could not give her the only thing she wanted. How much he wanted to see her happy. But if she left, it would destroy him.

"Let me go home," Hannah pleaded.

"I can't," Bear Claw said.

"I promise I won't tell anybody about here. I won't tell them about you," Hannah said. If anyone asked her questions, she would act ignorant. She had never been here.

"I wish I could give you what you ask for, but I can't," Bear Claw said sadly.

She glared at him. He said kind words to her, but if indeed he was kind, he would have let her go. Why was he keeping her here? She wondered. It suddenly dawned on her.

Bear Claw was stunned for a moment as she climbed onto him. Quickly, she pulled her dress over her head. Bear Claw gasped as he stared at her nakedness. She had nothing but a jumper. Her breasts were bare, with pink nipples staring invitingly at him.

"Is this what you want? Then take it, and let me go." Hannah had no idea where the courage came from, but if this was what he wanted, then he could have it, and she would leave. Her heart raced in fear and excitement. His gaze on her was heavy, and she felt liquid pool between her legs. She had never been this naked before any man.

"Take me," she said hoarsely, in a voice she could not recognize.

He would not take her this way. Not when she offered herself like this. Yet, he could not stop his hand from drifting to her. Her body went still. He could hear his heart beat as he placed a hand over her bare breast. She hissed as he squeezed it gently, his fingers grazing her nipple. His other hand went to her breast, and she moaned as both hands squeezed at her.

A sweet feeling filled her as he rubbed her breasts. It felt so good, the itch in her continued to get worse. She needed it to go. Her eyes widened as his mouth lowered to her. She gasped as he sucked on her greedily, just as her brother suckled on her mother. Her hand flew to his hair, her body writhing as he sucked harder.

"Oh!" she cried. Her body wrecked with a powerful feeling she could not explain. It consumed her, her toes throbbing with statics. It felt like she was flying, and then, she came down, breathing deeply. Her eyes opened slowly and she stared into his dark eyes. She was lost of words. That had been...

"I will not take you this way," Bear Claw said, gently lifting her from his body. It took all of his will to let her go. He was hard as a rock, and was filled with pain just hearing her cries of pleasure. Ah! Such a divine sight she looked as she exploded. It was her first time. He saw the surprise in her eyes. And the joy. And he felt like a man for being the one to give her such a gift. Yet, he could not be here with her in this state.

Her hands shook as she wore back her dress. By the time she turned around, he was out of the teepee. She took in a deep breath, laying on the bed of furs, as she tried to calm her heart. So that was what she had been missing. And she knew it was just the tip of the iceberg. He hadn't touched her down there. If he did, would she ever recover? Now she knew why premarital sex was considered a sin by God. That pleasure seemed so addictive. She squeezed her legs tight as she remembered him suckling on her. She hissed, as the ache began to grow again between her moist legs. She wished he had taken her and gotten rid of the ache for good. But he had left her. Why? Was he disappointed in her? Was she not good enough for him? The doubts revolved in her mind until she finally fell asleep.

Bear Claw grunted as he split wood with an axe. He was covered in sweat in the cold night as he smashed the axe into the stump of wood. The pieces were not needed. Neither did he have to split them. But he needed something to take his mind away from the frustration he felt.

"You are troubled."

He froze at the sound of Anika's voice. Most of the village were asleep, although he could hear the groans and moans of those fucking. It only infuriated him that he was not one of them. He turned around. She barely had anything on but a short dress.

"Did the white devil upset you?" Anija asked, stepping closer to him. She pressed herself against him, her breasts swelling. "Take me. Use me," she said, caressing his face.

He stared at the temptress before him who was offering herself to him. She would take whatever he gave her. She would heal the itch that consumed him. She moaned as he grabbed her, pulling her to his hardness.

"Yes!" she cried as he pushed her against a tree, lifting her dress up. She turned her face to him, and then he pulled away. For all he could see was Hannah's face as she rode on the rainbows.

"Goodnight," Bear Claw said, as he walked away, leaving the axe and pieces of wood behind. He had almost fallen, but he had regained control just in time. Laying with Anika would have been a mistake he would regret. One that would cause him shame, and make him look away from Hannah. Even now, he felt shame for thinking of being with another woman. This was unusual, especially for a chief like him. Men could have as many women as they wanted. As a chief he could have more than one wife. He could have a harem of women ready to satisfy his need. The women would throw themselves at him to ease his pleasure. Yet, there was one woman he greatly desired. He had seen her ride to the heavens, and he yearned for her only even more.

She was sleeping when he returned. Curled to a corner, away from where he would sleep. He settled on the empty spot, his eyes staring into the dark. He kept on replaying what had happened. How sweet she had tasted. How hungry she had been. And those cries of pleasure. He placed a hand over his rod. He'd had to take care of himself several times since she had arrived. She had given herself to him, and he would have been satisfied, but he would have regretted taking her. For she had been angry and full of spite. When he took her, she would be willing and conscious to satisfy his needs and be pleased to a place no one had ever taken her.

Soon, he said to himself as he stretched to her. The cracks were breaking. She was warming up to him. Soon, she would be his, and there would be no turning back. The thought of it made a grin from on his face. His eyes closed, and he was pulled into a dream that featured him and Hannah in sensual positions he had thought of from the moment he set his eyes on her.

Chapter 10

Strangers. They acted like perfect strangers. Hannah barely talked to Bear Claw. And he did the same. For a day now, they avoided each other. At least Hannah did most of it. She was just too embarrassed about what had happened to look him in the face. She did not know how long this would last, since they slept under the same roof, but she needed her space. All day, she could not stop thinking about what had happened. She berated herself constantly for almost giving herself to him. She had not been drunk. She had offered herself to him with her senses intact. And the truth was glaring. She desired him. As much as she wanted the idea to repulse her, it did not. He was a man in full sense. She had felt his hardness, something she had never seen but read about in books. And it had only made her want him even more.

It terrified her of what could have happened if he had taken her. At least he had been wise enough not to take her in that state. But at the same time it excited her. Now, she could not help but imagine what could have happened between them. Her body was still pent up. Her desire had not quenched.

Her head lifted from the mortar and pestle she wielded to the laughter of Anika. Today, it seemed the woman was out to taunt her. She had received several glances from her and her friends. They talked and laughed at her openly. But who was she to stand against them? She was not one of them, and they would turn against her without a thought.

“Ignore her,” Deer Fawn said.

“What does she say?” Hannah asked. She was even more interested when Deer Fawn looked away with worry. “What does she say?” Hannah repeated.

“That he came to her. He laid with her,” Deer Fawn said.

She did not have to mention who the person was for her to understand. The scoundrel! After having his tongue in her mouth, he had laid with Anika? How dare he! It seemed like a bucket of cold water was thrown over her, suddenly quenching her desire. She felt dirty that she had even for a second wanted him. She had been a fool. Just like those women who had lined the streets at night for the pleasure of men according to Samuel.

She got up, hurrying away as Anika’s laughter seemed to grow louder. She broke into a run, towards the trees. Thankfully, there was no one there to witness her heartbreak. She sat on a stump, taking deep breaths. She hated how upset she felt. Bear Claw was nothing

to her. He could be with any woman he wanted. All the women in the camp if he desired. Angrily, she kicked a stone which bounced off.

“Anger.”

She turned around and faced Bear Claw’s sister, the one who had returned. Couldn’t the family leave her?

The woman smiled. “You not happy to see me,” she said in broken English. “My brother upset you.”

Hannah shrugged. She didn’t feel like talking about the scoundrel of a brother who had always had ill intentions towards her.

“What he do?” White Dove asked, approaching her.

“Nothing,” she stared towards the line of trees.

“Hmm...” the woman grimaced as she sat on a stump.

“Are you okay?” Hannah asked.

“Baby, stubborn.”

Hannah nodded. Prior to her mother being pregnant, she had known nothing about babies, but then her mother had gotten pregnant, and Hannah had learned all she could about babies. She had been by her mother’s side, not as if she had anywhere to be, all through the pregnancy. The baby had arrived early, the midwife had been out of town, and it had been Hannah who had delivered her younger brother into the world. The experience had created a new dream in her, to be a midwife, but Samuel had laughed at the idea, and called it nonsense. She had not forgotten the dream, hoping that one day it would be true. But with her imprisoned, how would that work? It was just another reminder of her situation.

“He. Bear Claw. He act tough. But he soft. He need care,” White Dove said.

Hannah scoffed. The man was more than capable of taking care of himself. Like last night when he had left and had gone straight into the arms of another woman, while she rolled about in regrets. He could get all the care he needed from that woman.

“He like you. You like him too.”

Hannah didn’t reply. Yes, she liked him. She wished she didn’t, but she did, but that didn’t meant she would act the fool and fawn over him. He had all the women here to do that for him. She wished Anika best of luck with dealing with the grumpy man. She would need all of it.

“You is lucky. Me, my mate bad to me.” As the woman spoke, there was sadness in her eyes, and Hannah ached to comfort her, but she did not want to be too forward. She knew a lot about being hurt. Growing up, the next-door neighbor had hurt his wife. The woman had an explanation for every bruise, and at a point, people stopped asking. The man never let her go out unattended, and he found a reason to drag her home. Once, he had pulled her home from the fair,

because a man stopped to ask for directions. When they had left she had seen the woman watching from the window. She had waved to her, but the blinds had fallen, yet she saw the shadow of the woman watching.

Her mother's marriage to Samuel involved no physical abuse, but words were his tool of manipulation, and just at times, Hannah could not help but wonder if this wasn't more efficient. He acted like her mother was a child, and needed to be taken care of all around. He had made her into a shadow of herself, pulling her further into a shell. It was the birth of her brother that had brought back the spark in her eyes, a spark which had began to fade since they started on this journey. She should have insisted more, stood her ground that they did not go on the journey. But she suspected that Samuel would have been more than glad to have left her behind, holding his newborn child as a tool of negotiation with her mother. She knew her mother; she had a sense of duty and would go anywhere her husband and child went.

"You sad. Brother hurt you?"

Hannah smiled at the fierce look on her face. She imagined the small woman taking up a fight against the giant of a man. Bear Claw might have the body of an ox, but she suspected the sister was not one to be played with.

"No," she said. The woman looked relieved and Hannah smiled. It was good to have someone look out for her.

The woman placed a hand on her then stood up. Hannah stared at a spot. She had overstayed her welcome here. Bear Claw's scheming ways was the reminder she needed that she needed to be out of here. She needed to figure out and execute her escape plan with more enthusiasm than before. She had to leave Bear Claw and his people before she was broken, not just physically but also emotionally.

She had been watching. The rotation of the guards happened at a certain time when the sun was down. For a brief moment, while the men exchanged shifts, there was a lapse of time where they seemed to exchange jokes and share what they had seen. In that moment, she could slip through the gates. But she needed a disguise. Something that would let her go unseen. A horse would gain her speed, but it was too conspicuous. Getting a horse out of the camp ahead of time was way too risky, not only would it lead to questions. Where would she keep the horse? How would she feed it? It would escape, perhaps back to the camp. Or worse, be devoured by the wild. She would have to find her way back home on foot, hoping that a good Samaritan would find her. A good Samaritan that wasn't an Indian, she'd had enough of their scoundrel ways to last a lifetime.

There was more to her silence, Bear Claw noticed as the night

rolled into another day. He could feel her fuming with anger as she laid next to him on the fur all through the night. Was she that angry with him over what had happened? But he had done no wrong to her. He had respected her virtues despite his desire.

Her anger and ignoring of him put him in a foul mood. With how loud he barked at everyone, his patience running thin, they scrambled out of his way. He decided that if he wasn't going to have a great day, no one would.

He glared at Nari who wore a similar scowl. The man handed him a gourd which he took a generous drink from.

"Arghhh!" he glared at him. He had drank bitter roots which had a bitter taste that lingered for hours.

"You deserve it," Juh said, a smile creeping. "What has you angry? The white devil?"

He responded with slamming his axe into the wood.

"It has to be her," Juh said.

"Get out!" he growled. He did not want company.

"She refused to lay with you?" Juh inquired.

He glared at his friend. He was getting angrier. He wanted to be alone to vent his frustration onto the wood.

"Did you lay with Anika?"

The axe hovered mid air. Then it fell to his side. "What did you say?"

"There's a rumor. That you laid with Anika two nights ago. She claims you took her and promised her more."

His fists clenched. Juh took a step back as he vibrated with anger, a rare sight for the chief.

He never hurt women. He treated them like the weaker sex that they were. The keeper of nature. The keeper of the home. The only woman he had relatively used force on was Hannah when he was bringing her home. In that moment, he wanted to hurt Anika. He knew she was the one to have started the spread of the rumor. It was payback for his rejection of her two nights ago. She had spun the story, making it seem like he desired her. Making it seem that he had been... It fell into place now. Her attitude towards him. Somehow Hannah had heard the news. Now, she thought little of him. She must think him a scoundrel. She must despise him.

"Sachem!" Juh called after him as he returned to the camp.

Everyone gave way for him, sensing his anger. There was one person he sought. And he found Anika, laughing and talking in the midst of her peers.

The laughter ceased as he hovered above her. She looked up to him and he almost smiled at the fear in her eyes. She knew she was in trouble. But the fear disappeared, quickly replaced by mischief.

She stood, thrusting her chest at him as she reached for him in a familiarity. He grabbed her arm, earning a gasp.

“What did you say? What have you done?” he growled.

“I... I...” Gone was the confidence she danced around with. The reality of what he could do to her had now become clear to her.

“You claimed I laid with you!” he said angrily.

“No! No! I said no such thing!” There was a hush behind her that said she lied. Many would come forward to admit her lies. But it was childish to even demand for such. For many, it was a feeble lie that made her seem desperate. It was not a lie that deserved to be punished. Her action would be blamed on infatuation. In the real sense she had done nothing wrong. Men lied they laid with women. Women lied they laid with men. It was a conquest and nothing more.

He let go of her. There was an apology at the tip of his tongue for rough handling her, but she did not deserve it. He turned around and stormed off, in search of one person.

His enquires led him to the trees, where he knew she hid. He saw her seated, staring into the distance. She looked so lost. So alone, that it made him ache. Had he done a bad thing bringing her here? All this time he had been selfish, holding on to the knowledge that she was his mate. But what if she remained unhappy? What if she didn't fit amongst his people. He did not want to lose her. But at the same time, he would not be able to handle her unhappiness.

He stepped on a branch that broke under his weight. Her eyes flew to him and she frowned. She looked away as he approached her.

“What do you want?” Hannah snapped.

“I never laid with her.”

Her eyes flew to him. She certainly had not been expecting that. She however didn't believe him. “She was naked on your fur. I haven't forgotten that.” She should have known then that he was a busy man. With women. “You left me last night.”

“To breathe. I met her...”

She looked at him. Where was this leading?

“I was weak with desire. Tempted. But I did not lay with her.”

As much as she did not want to admit it, she believed him. Why would he even lie about such a thing? Anika on the other hand had been a troublemaker. However...

“You don't owe me an explanation,” Hannah said. He could do whatever he wanted to do with his life.

“You need to know. I desire you only,” Bear Claw said, placing a hand on her shoulder. She flinched, moving away from him.

“Do not desire me!” she glared at him. How could he tell her such words? She wasn't even sure if he was being honest with her.

He pulled her to him, his lips smashing into hers. She resisted

for a moment as the kiss deepened, her body went limp. She moaned, her hands hovering, unsure of what to do.

The kiss was powerful. Desperate. Hungry. She wanted more as she pressed her body to his. She stretched on tiptoes, kissing him.

And then he pushed her dress down. She gasped as his rough tan hand grabbed at her breast. Tweaking it. Her back hit a tree as his mouth lowered to her. She bit silently the moan that threatened to explode. He was hungry. For her. Sucking her deep into his mouth.

“Bear Claw!” she cried, her fingers digging into his hair.

He pulled away from her, taking deep breaths.

“You desire me.”

She shook her head frantically.

“Why do you deny this?” he asked.

“I...” How could she deny what was clear and obvious?

“I want you,” Bear Claw whispered, sending a chill over her body. “You fight the truth. Our desire. Tonight, we will have each other.” Bear Claw had made up his mind in that moment. He could not wait any more to have her. He needed to be buried inside her.

Her eyes widened at his words. No way!

“I will not force you,” he quickly said, reading her fear. “I will give you pleasure only. You decide.”

He pulled away from her. He had given her a choice. To be with him tonight. Or not to be with him. Whatever choice she made, he would accept it. If she choose not to be with him, then he would accept that the spirits were unfair in giving a woman who did not desire him.

Hannah watched as he left. His shoulders slumped as if in resignation. A scream welled inside her. She wanted to yell. Throw something. She had never felt this frustrated in her life. He was giving her a choice. And some part of her felt she should consider herself lucky. How many brutes like him would give her a choice? Instead of taking her from the very day she had come here. He had been patient with her.

Another part of her roared in anger. It was her body. Not his. She decided who she would lay with. No one should take that from her.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath of the warm air. If she said no, would he let her go? Perhaps he would and she would return to her family. She knew he would not force himself on her. And if she said yes. To a night of passion. Would he let her go?

The choices she had were confusing. What however was not confusing was that she wanted the brute who had kidnapped him. She wanted him to tempt her with the sweet kisses. She wanted him to give her pleasure that no man had given her.

She opened her eyes. She was not back at home. She was out here in the middle of nowhere. For a moment she had hoped that when she opened them, she would not have to make tough decisions.

A bird flew over in the sky. The evening would soon arrive. And soon after the night would come.

Chapter 11

Anxiousness. Or was it excitement? Bear Claw could not tell which as he walked into the teepee. He had not been able to eat dinner. He had not been able to concentrate on the dancing. All he could think of was Hannah. Her decision mattered greatly to him. He had never been this anxious in his life. Not when he courted his first maiden.

The teepee was dimly lit. Was it always this way? Or it was just for tonight, he wondered.

Hannah froze when he walked in. It was a strange feeling, but she could always sense his presence. Her fingers hovered over her hair which she combed with the wooden comb he had given her. Her entire body began to shake. She had never done this before. She did not even know what to expect. What if she was hurt? What if...

"Easy," Bear Claw said, taking the comb from her.

Her body only shook more with him this close to her. She made the mistake of looking at him and gasped. Had his eyes gotten darker?

"What have you decided?" Bear Claw asked, his eyes on her as she ran the comb through her hair.

"I..." She was lost of words to say. Why did her heart beat this fast? She took a deep breathe. She needed to stop acting like an idiot. "Yes."

His eyes flared at just that one word. "Yes to?"

"You."

The comb dropped as his lips crashed to hers. She was startled for a moment then her lips opened to accept him. There was a rush. A hunger to taste her. Her body moved towards him as he kissed her, desperate to taste her.

Bear Claw had never wanted to kiss a woman so bad as he wanted to kiss Hannah. He was not the type of man who wasted time on kisses. But with her, he wanted to taste all of her.

The kiss deepened. It slowed down and he took his time savoring her lips, pulling it into his mouth as he bit softly on it. This earned him a gasp that made him harder. He wanted every part of her.

They pulled away from each other taking deep breaths. He reached for her again kissing her, getting little moaning sounds from her.

A ripping sound made Hannah gasp. She looked down at her nightwear. Or at least what remained of it. Then at Bear Claw who stared longingly at her pale breasts, the nipples perked. Because of

him or the cold he could not be sure.

“You could have—”

Her words were swallowed as he pulled her to him. His callused hand was placed over her breast. He knead it gently, teasing her nipple with his finger. His mouth lowered to her other breast. He pulled it into his mouth with a pop.

The sensations she felt were overwhelming her. She moaned thrusting herself to his mouth. She wanted him to... She didn't know what she even wanted. But the feelings, she wanted more of them.

Her fingers flew to his hair, her fingers running through his dark hair as he suckled on her.

She sighed when he pulled away from her. Then he laid her softly on the fur, his hands playing with her body.

Her body went still as he pushed what remained of the dress down her body. She felt naked as the dress went lower, stopping at the deep.

Bear Claw held her gaze, watching her chest rise and fall. She was excited. And so was he. He had never wanted a woman as much as he wanted this woman. His rod was the hardest it had ever been. And he was worried it would break.

He groaned in delight as the dress revealed her bareness. She was so beautiful. That V between her that he had desired to plunged into.

She looked vulnerable lying there naked, watching him with wariness.

“What are you doing?” Hannah frowned as he pulled her to him, his hands on her waist. His head lowered to her private parts. That could not be al— Hannah gasped as he flicked his tongue over her. Oh God! He did it again and she gasped.

The feeling was beyond description. Again he did it. This time it went deeper, slithering into her. Her fingers fell, clenching the fur hard.

Her legs wrapped around him, placed on his shoulder as his tongue continued to clean her.

She tried to be quiet. But how could she when she was consumed by pleasure? With a hunger she could not describe, he ate her like she was his last meal.

“Yes! Yes!!” she cried, writhing against his mouth.

Her eyes widened, as a finger slid into her. Then another. He thrust his fingers into her dripping core in a rhythm.

The woman tasted divine. Bear Claw was hungry, and he kept on licking her, exploring her folds. His rod strained, eager to explore what it was that caused them discomfort. He drank from her river, listening to her cries as they grew louder when he thrust his fingers

into her. She liked that, he could tell her as her cries grew louder. She was trying to hold them back, but it was a failure.

A powerful force filled her, starting from her feet, and consuming her entire body. A bright light flashed as she climaxed, her body jerking as she fell to the fur.

Silence. Hannah took deep breaths, trying to regain her sanity. She was speechless, with no words to describe how good all of that had felt. She looked to Bear Claw who lifted his head, his mouth glistening with her essence.

A flush covered her face, running through her entire body.

“No. Don’t look away,” Bear Claw said. She need not be embarrassed over what had happened.

She nodded. But she did feel embarrassed.

He stood up, and she watched him. Her body shook, more in excitement with a sprinkle of fear as he dropped his weapons. The knife dropped with a clang. It was followed by two daggers. And then a longer knife.

She had always admired his chest, but tonight she took it in full glory. There were scar marks over his chest, she would ask him later how he had gotten them, she decided, tucking it at the back of her mind.

His chest was broad. And well sculptured. Tan from the rays of the sun. Her eyes lowered as his hands went down, hovering above his breechcloth. Swiftly, he removed it. She gasped as it dropped to the ground. It was... Big.

Fear suddenly filled her as she wondered how it would fit into her. Yet, she grew moist just imagining it inside her.

She gulped as he took a step towards her. Then another. And another. Until he stood above her.

“I will not hurt you,” Bear Claw whispered. He held back his will as he was about to explode.

He pulled her to him, her breasts smashing against his chest, his rod on her belly. They both moaned at the contact.

He kissed her, squeezing at her breasts, as his rod ached in excitement. Bear Claw’s hand shook as he touched his rod.

Hannah hissed as his rod grazed her entrance. It was... A sharp pain consumed her as he slowly slid into her. She gritted on pain, her fingers digging into his bare back.

“You said—” she cried with tears in her eyes.

He hated seeing her being hurt, but the barrier needed to be passed through. He thrust deeper and a tear rolled down her eyes. She was so tight. So warm.

The pain went down, replaced with a new feeling. A throbbing pleasure. She wanted more. He thrust deeper into her and she

moaned, her legs wrapping around him.

"Please..." she cried out for a need.

He pulled from within her then pounded into her. Her moans filled the room as he pounded into her in a slow rhythmic pace.

"More! More!" Hannah cried.

Bear Claw groaned, thrusting harder into her. Her walls tightened around him, pulling him deeper into the warmth she possessed. He was big but in her he was a perfect fit. She moaned, writhing as her fingers dug into his back. He thrust into her, capturing her lips and screams as he kissed her.

A scream escaped her lips as he shoved harder into her. Her walls clenched around him and then she saw the stars as she climaxed. He exploded in her, spilling his hot seed that filled her. And all was silent except for their slow breaths.

He got off her, laying by her side. It had been more than he had hoped it would be.

Hannah stared at the night sky that peak through the top of the tepee. She had not expected it would be that mind shattering. Everyone had always considered sex a sin. A vile and evil thing. No one has said it was this pleasurable. Was this the reason it was considered a sin?

He pulled her to him, and she came to him, resting her head on his shoulder. Sleep was near, and soon her eyes were close to dreams.

*

Hannah woke with a bit of soreness. Other than that, she felt normal. She had woken up alone, but Bear Claw had woken her earlier, informing her he was going out with the men. She wore a smile on her face. One of contentment.

Last night had indeed been a new experience. They had gone at it for two more times, and each time it ended, it felt powerful. She knew it was because of him. He was a good lover. If she had lain with someone else, she doubted it would have been this good. He had been gentle with her. He had caressed her body. He had done things to her that made her blush in the day, just thinking of them. Things she had considered impossible until he did them to her.

As she walked past the village, the women stared at her with a smile, and she smiled back at them. Deer Fawn joined her with a smile.

"Why are you smiling?" she wondered aloud.

"Night," Deer Fawn said.

Her face turned red with the realization. They had not just been greeting her. She looked around and noticed their knowing smiles and laughs. They had heard! Her hand flew to her face in embarrassment. At a point, she had let go of all sense of decorum, and her voice had

been rather loud for them not to hear. At night, she used to hear sounds, moans and groans, and had thought they were from animals. Now she knew better.

Deer Fawn laughed. "Did he treat you right?"

She nodded. He had treated her well. She returned to the teepee, just in time to see Aiyana. The sister stared at the red spot on the fur. She had not noticed the blood when she woke. For the first time, Aiyana smiled at her.

"Did he treat you well?" Aiyana asked.

What was it about this woman and asking if he had treated her well. She thought back to the memory of his tongue buried in her, and she blushed. Noticing it, Aiyana laughed.

Aiyana left and returned with hot water, and a warm drink which warmed her inside, making her feel better instantly. The warm water on her skin helped with the soreness.

A smile was on her lips as she sat beside the children. For the first time in a very long time, she felt at peace.

*

Bear Claw shook his head in amusement as the men laughed behind him. He had received claps on his back when he joined them for the hunt. And then they had seen the scratches on his back. He had not realized how bad it was until he woke this morning with pains from his back. Her fingers had indeed dug deep.

"You have finally got the white devil out of your system," Juh said, riding next to him.

That was the thing. He hadn't. After one night, he wanted another. And after another, he knew he would want endless nights with her. A night wasn't enough to satisfy his desire for her. A lifetime night perhaps be enough.

"When does she leave?"

He rode ahead instead. Her leaving was impossible now. Not after he had drank from her essence. Not after he had buried his rod in her and heard her scream his name. She belonged to him, he thought with ferocity. After what had happened, he was not letting her go. But now it was up to him to convince her to stay with him.

"We can drop her at the ravine. Her kind will come for her."

He growled at Juh. He had been deep in thoughts and had not seen him ride next to him. "Don't push me," he warned, slapping the horse to ride off. Hannah was not going anywhere. She belonged right here with him.

The men returned at noon with a big Buffalo. It had been a good hunt. There were murmurs that good fortune would follow them for the next few days. For tonight they would eat well.

"You are back," Hannah said when she turned around to Bear

Claw. It suddenly felt awkward. This man had seen her nakedness. He had done a lot of things to her. Whether she liked to admit it or not, things had changed between them. A dynamic change.

He smiled, sensing her discomfort. He caressed her face, and she returned his smile. "How have you fared?" He asked as they walked.

Hannah shrugged. She fared well. However she had been eager for him to return. A part of her had thought after last night he would discard her, just like the women of the night. But he was warm towards her, erasing her fears.

"Are you okay?" He asked with concern when he got no response.

"Yes I am. You... You were gentle." She didn't know why she told him that. He smiled at her words and she was glad she had.

He took her hand, leading her to the horse.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

He responded by putting her on the horse. They went to a meadow. She could not help but dart her eyes around as they went, taking note of the different twists and turns.

"Why is the village set on higher ground?" she asked.

"A higher ground gives us advantage to see our enemies when they approach. A lower ground gives our enemies an upper hand to watch us before they attack," Bear Claw said.

She looked up at the lands. There was peace here. It seemed they were one with nature. The birds sang louder. The air was cool.

"Come let me show you something," Bear Claw said, taking her hand. He led her to the cliff and she gasped. It was so beautiful out here. Sights like this had to rival true nature which she had heard so much about.

He spoke to her. He told her of the history of his people. How they had come to be. His story differed greatly from the Christian creation story. She told him this.

"I hear there are more true believers even north of the world. Different theories but there's a constant. A creator. It was..." He had almost told her that he had seen her in his dreams, but he feared that would scare her off. It was too soon. He could sense her watching their environment and it was not because of the scenery.

"Wherever we come from. Whoever we serve. We have the same creator. And a troublemaker."

"Troublemaker?"

"Yes. The trickster."

"Oh. We call him the devil," Hannah said with understanding.

Bear Claw burst into a laugh. She waited for him to calm down then explain. "My people. We believe the trickster created your kind."

Now was her time to smile. "Well, I would say the same for my people."

He smiled back at her. Despite the different places they came from, they were so much alike.

"Tell me about your family," Bear Claw said.

Her smile disappeared. For a moment it seemed like she would not talk. "It has always been my mother and I for as long as I can remember. My father died when she was pregnant. He never saw me."

His heart ached at her pain. He had lost his father but at least the man got to see him become a man. It must have been a lonely life without a father, with just her and her mother.

"I worked at the seamstress and she ran a little bakery which we managed to survive." She told him of how she had to start writing for the preacher so they could have more money. The kind preacher had taken pity on her and her mother and helped them any way he could.

"It was at the church she met Samuel," Hannah said with a grimace.

"Sanuel?"

"Samuel," she corrected. "My stepfather."

The man he had wanted to knock out with how much he complained about those books. He had been more worried about the papers, instead of his stepdaughter.

"I believe he saw my mother as vulnerable. A single widow with a child with a small income and a house. He swooped in and tried to be a knight in shining armor."

He frowned, not familiar with the phrase. She explained it to him. "Knights are warriors. They protect and defend. In the old times, maidens were saved from dragons and bandits by knights."

He nodded, getting the drift although not clear enough.

Hannah told him of how Samuel had courted her mother sweetly. He would come with flowers and books, and the occasional sweets. For so long, her mother had lived a single life, with barely any suitors. She was not an ugly woman, but a sad and harsh life had caused more than physical scars. A seemingly well respected man like Samuel casting his attention on her, had made her mother bloom.

However, while she liked seeing her mother happy, Hannah had seen something foul in Samuel. He had come off as a sleaze. He had no proper job, except a pastor title. He was new in town and cast his eyes on her mother. She saw a swindle, but her mother had paid no ear to her advice.

Three months into their courting, they had been married. Hannah had voiced her worries then.

"It is too soon mama! You don't even know him!" she cried as

her mother ironed her clothes for the week.

"It doesn't matter how long we have know each other. I knew... Your father for ten years, and we did not even last a year as husband and wife," Regina said.

"But mama—"

"That will be all on the matter. I have made my choice," Regina said with a rare firmness.

The wedding was held the following week at the courthouse. Regina wore a blue gown Hannah had grudgingly made. Samuel had worn a borrowed suit. Hannah has stood in as a witness. And so had the old preacher.

She had hoped that she was wrong. That Samuel was a actually a kind man she had misread. A man who would care and love her mother. Her fears had been confirmed two weeks later. Samuel left for a trip and when he returned, it was with two children, a boy and a girl.

She laughed at the stunned look on Bear Claw's face.

"No!"

"True."

Her mother had looked like she was about to faint. Hannah had been angry, she knew he was a scoundrel but to hide the fact that he had two children? That was evil!

She had talked to her mother to throw him out. The marriage could be annulled. But Samuel had shooed her and the children aside, and locked himself in a room with her mother. Her ears against the door, she had listen to him cry as he told a tale of how he was a widower, and how he had left the children with his sister in search of greener pastures.

"I did not want to lose you," Samuel had said. "I accepted you and your daughter. Why not do the same for me and my children?"

His words had been enough to convince her mother to not only forgive him, but accept his children into her home.

"He's an idiot!" Bear Claw spat.

Hannah chuckled. Indeed he was an idiot. His true self had revealed in the coming months. He had removed his sheep clothing, and the wolf had emerged. He spent his day lazing around, demanding for food and care, when he barely contributed anything to the household. He had several plans to be invested in. A patent for anything that might make him money. At first her mother had funded his exploits, which always failed, with debtors at their door.

"He has a sweet mouth. Sweeter than honey," Hannah said.

Bear Claw grinned. He loved honey.

"He can charm just about anyone with his smiles and convincing words. She paid for his debts because she cared for him."

He had no pity for her and continued to bring shame to her mother.

"He would have sold our house too, given it up to fund his expedition but the house had belonged to my father's mother and ownership had been passed to my mother and me. According to her will, the two of us had to agree to sell the house."

For an expedition to Egypt to look for a treasure, Samuel had begun to seek for funds. With debtors and with people considering him a scoundrel, he was no longer trusted and had barely anyone willing to give him money.

"We have to sell the house," Samuel said over dinner one day.

He had been met with stunned look by mother and daughter.

"Our house?"

"Yes. I know none of the other plans worked out, but I am convinced of this. I will be going with the crew myself to Egypt. It will be a success," Samuel said excitedly. "I already have a buyer for the house. All you have to do is sign."

"Where will we live papa?" Thomas asked.

"We will rent the quarters above the saloon. I have spoken to the Madame..."

Of course, Hannah had listened to him talk on about his plan. He had presented before her mother an already written contract. Although her mother had looked weary, if it had been up to her, she would have signed.

"The thing is, the house doesn't belong to me alone," Regina said.

"What do you mean?" Samuel asked, his smile slipping away, a dent in his excitement.

"The house belongs to Hannah and me. It cannot be sold without our joint consent," Regina said.

His gaze turned to her and Hannah smiled. For the first time, he didn't look happy.

"Did he leave it at that?" Bear Claw said. He was intrigued by her story. She looked animated as she told him all that had happened.

"No way!"

Samuel had sweet mouthed her mother into talking to her to sell the house. But Hannah had vehemently refused. The house was the only thing keeping them from being on the streets. With Samuel off to Egypt on some silly expedition, what would they fall back on? He might as well abandon them and they would never hear from him again. And what if he died on the voyage? There were just too many cons of selling the house.

"I think she was relieved that I didn't give in, because she did not push me. She couldn't say no, but she counted on me being firm,"

Hannah said.

Samuel had also tried talking to her. But she had told him point blank she was not selling her home, the only thing she had of her father, to sponsor a wasted venture.

“He got angry. And took it out on my mother. He called her names. Treated her cruelly.”

He had wanted her to pity her mother and give in. And while she worried for her mother, she had stood her ground.

Her refusal to sell the house had fueled his hatred for her. He had groveled, reducing himself to her level, and yet she turned him down. It was perhaps the first win she would have when it came to him. But it had come with great consequences, her mother being hurt, and her mother pulling away from her in her bid to support her husband.

“I did agree to sell the house,” Hannah said after a moment.

She had been adamant not to. If not for her mother and brother she wouldn't have. Her baby brother had been six months when Samuel came up with the idea to go to California. By then, news about the gold rush had began to spread.

“There are new there. They be in need of preacher. We going to have a congregation,” Samuel brimmed with excitement.

The idea had grown with every day that went by. A friend of Samuel who had gone to California sent a letter about how the streets were lined with gold. Even more than before, Samuel wanted to go to California. The thought of having gold coins dropped in the offering box every Sunday was his biggest motivation.

This time around, her mother had stood her ground. She was not going anywhere with her young son. But Samuel had a plan up his sleeves.

“We are going to California. I don't care if you two lasses come with me. I am going with Thomas and Mary, and my newborn son.”

The threat had made Hannah and her mother go pale. Samuel stormed, knowing his words had an effect on them.

It was a threat but Samuel was capable of going through with it to prove a point. He was a scoundrel and they could wake up one morning to find baby Joseph gone. It was a thought that scared Hannah and her mother. Before Joseph's birth, there had been nothing to hold against Hannah, but she would not risk the safety and life of her brother because of Samuel.

The following week, the house had been put up for sale. Buyers had quickly come around and the house had been sold. Her only solace was that Hannah had insisted on keeping her share of the sales. Samuel had been pissed but she refused to budge from that decision. She knew he would easily squander the money. She had put in the

care of the only bank in town for when the need arose. Her mother on the other hand had presented her proceeds to him like the diligent wife that she was.

“He bought a shabby wagon,” Hannah grimaced.

“And horses,” Bear Claw added. It was a surprise those horses had survived that long. A dew more days and they would be vulture meat. They were not meant for long distance journeys.

“I miss them,” Hannah said. She even missed the annoying stepfather.

Bear Claw said nothing.

“Will I ever see them again?” she wondered aloud. What if she could not escape from here?

“I don’t know,” Bear Claw said.

She glared at him. How could he not know? He was the one who kept her captive. He was the one who could release her. Yet he did not know?

He reached for her, and she slapped his hand away, stumbling up.

“Hannah!”

“I need to relief myself,” Hannah threw at him. She just needed a moment. She had hoped that he would have pity on her and set her free, but he was cold blooded and refused to budge.

How could she be attracted to someone like that? It made her angry with herself. She looked around the trees and went in the midst of both. She hadn’t lied. She wanted to relief herself. She lifted her dress and squatted. She fumed as the trickle poured on the grass. The nerve of him! Why on earth couldn’t he just let her go? Was it an ego problem? Did he consider her a spoil of war? Or some sort of commodity to be displayed to all? But he had done none of that to this day.

A chill went over her body, and the hairs on her arms rose. She was not alone. Someone was watching her. She hurried up and dashed out from the trees. Where was Bear Claw? She knew it had not been him watching her.

She threw a glance over her shoulder but saw no one. Yet she knew someone was watching her. Her steps sped. And then she broke into a run.

“Bear Claw!” she shouted, just as she was grabbed from behind. Her scream was swallowed by a hand placed over her mouth. She was whirled around, firm hands digging into her shoulders. She gasped as she stared into dark cruel eyes. There were paintings on his head and marks around his eyes.

He was an Indian. Like Bear Claw. But that was where the comparison ended. She knew as she stared at him that he lacked even

a bit of Bear Claw's softness. She knew that he liked to hurt others, and would take more pleasure hurting her.

She flinched as he caressed her face with rough fingers. Bear Claw had done the same, but it had not disgusted her or made her feel dirty.

She struggled as he pulled her to him. She heard a laugh and glanced around to see two more men just like him. Another approached them on a horse.

Her eyes looked around frantically. Where on earth was Bear Claw? She would rather be with him than any of these men who would hurt her without care.

"Let go of me you brute!" she mumbled into the hand over her mouth.

He laughed, and so did the other men, sending more chills over her body.

The man dragged her, towards the trees. Her eyes widened. She had a faint idea of what they were about to do. She planted her feet on the ground but it was of no use. He pulled at her with more force.

"Enough!" Bear Claw yelled as he grabbed one of the men from behind, a dagger at his throat.

"Bear Claw." The hold on her loosened but not enough for her to escape.

From within the trees emerged more men. She relaxed when she identified them as the men from the village.

The men began to speak but she could not keep up with them. Bear Claw looked really pissed. She had never seen him this way.

She gasped as the hold on her tightened. From the way the man sounded, he didn't seem happy. Her eyes widened as the dagger flicked the man, blood flowing.

Her knees bruised the ground as the man pushed her. Bear Claw let go of the other man and she scrambled into his arms. Tears welled in her eyes, but she was not going to cry. At least not here.

His arms wrapped around her as he said some words to the other man. The other man said something back to him harshly.

"They are leaving," Bear Claw said tenderly to her. She pulled away just in time to see the men leaving. The one who had held her threw her a dirty look that made her go cold instantly.

They were swallowed by the trees, and it was only then she relaxed. She realized her heart had been racing with so much fear.

She burst into tears as he wrapped his arms around her. She had never been as scared in her life. Not even when she had been kidnapped on the trail. If he hadn't come, not only would they have raped her, she knew they would have killed her. Just the thought sent chills all over her body.

Bear Claw was mad at her for running off. He should punish her, but her fear was enough punishment. He shuddered to think of what could have happened if he hadn't found her.

"Who was that?" Hannah asked, pulling away, as she dabbed her eyes.

"Chua," Bear Claw said with distaste.

"What... What did you say?"

He had threatened to kill one of Chua's men if he did not let the woman go.

"Kill him then. He's of no use to me. But this woman shall warm my bed," Chua said.

The dagger deepened and the man underneath his hold struggled.

Chua laughed. "So it is true that you have been charmed by a white devil. I never thought the day would come."

"Let her go," Bear Claw said. "You don't want to make an enemy of me."

It was those words that had made Chua loosen his hold on her. Bear Claw was known to be a calm leader, but a fierce warrior. His enemies avoided battle with him, and his friends cherished the peace.

"I found her Bear Claw. And by law, she be—"

"You found no one Chua. She's under my protection. She's mine," Bear Claw sneered.

"I will let her go, but the next time I see this white devil, she belongs to me."

He glared and the man laughed, just as he pushed Hannah to the ground.

"You should not have gone on your own," Bear Claw said.

"So now it is my fault that... That..." Tears welled in her eyes.

"Chua is a cruel leader. He hurts things. Humans. Animals."

Hannah shuddered. She really did not like the man.

"He's the third son of a chief. He has tried to take his brothers. They fear him. And they know that their lives are at stake."

It was only their father's presence that kept him from destroying all around him, but when the old man died, chaos would reign in his village.

Chua had a history of skinning and killing calm animals like the rabbit and birds. Many women had cried of him hurting them, with physical marks to show for it. He was a terror and many feared confronting him because of his evil ways. It was best to be silent than to be in his bad books.

He hugged Hannah. He had made the mistake of letting her go to relieve herself. As he wondered about what he had done wrong, he had heard a scream. She had called out his name. His legs had picked

pace as he ran to save her from what troubled her.

He had not expected to see Chua holding his woman. Anger had flared in him. He would have killed the man right there for merely laying a hand on his woman. But killing Chua would have created strife within their tribes. Even though his people would have been relieved with his death, they would avenge to sustain their pride.

"We must go," Bear Claw said.

Hannah had no complains. She followed him. The other men followed them and she felt safe. With Bear Claw by her side, she knew she would not be hurt. He would protect her.

He placed her on the horse, sitting behind her. The horse raced as if sensing that danger was not far behind. Her eyes closed but she replayed the scene of that monster hands on her.

"We will soon be home," Bear Claw said gently, holding her.

She rested on his chest. That encounter had really shaken her. She had just been minutes from grievous harm. And death, she added silently. For a long time she had been inside the village, oblivious to danger. There was evil out there. Pure evil.

She jumped off the horse when thru returned to the village. The first thing she did was to take her bath. She scrubbed herself hard to wash off every traces of that man's body. Yet it seemed to linger on. Tears burst from her eyes, her body heaving.

"It is going to be fine," she whispered to herself over and over again. She was going to get out of here, away from these cruel people and their thirst for blood.

She curled up on the fur but she could jot sleep. There was a rage in her waiting to explode. She should not be here, at the mercy of a vagabond.

"Hannah."

She glared at him. "I was almost raped and killed because of you!" she snapped.

"I will never let anything happen to you," Bear Claw said calmly.

"This is all your fault!" Hannah glared.

He knew she was spoiling for a fight. He could sense her anger. At him. And at herself. He would not fall for it.

"No one will hurt you. Ever. I will protect you," Bear Claw said with all seriousness.

"You won't always be around," Hannah said quietly.

"I will teach you how to protect yourself," Bear Claw said, pulling her to him. She pushed him away but he held onto her, refusing to let her go. Her weak blows were feeble. She looked away as he leaned in for a kiss. She wasn't in the mood. But he persisted. He kissed her nose, then her lips which she paused firmly. She held back

a gasp as he nibbled on her ear. His kisses went lower, to her neck. She could not hold back the gasp as he kissed long and hard on her neck. He pushed down her dress, his palm embracing her breast. She hated how her body betrayed her, her nipples hardening for him.

“Oh!” she hissed as his tongue circled her stiff nipple. It felt so good. All her anger disappeared as she clutched at him. He sucked harder, biting softly on her.

Bear Claw was hungry for her, he sucked hungrily on her, enjoying her soft gasps which she tried to hide.

“Let go of me!” she mumbled, pushing him off her. Her anger had returned despite the pleasure she felt.

He replied by slipping his fingers into her. They both hissed as his dry fingers met her dripping wet folds. Her body pressed to him in excitement.

“I hate you!” she snapped as those fingers thrust into her. She squeezed her legs around him as they pounded faster into her. Faster and faster. He understood how hard she wanted this. “More!” she cried as he took her nipple, grazing his finger across a part of her that sent chills of pleasure all over her.

He responded with thrusting his thumb into her. She held back a moan, not wanting to be another topic amongst the women because of her sounds.

Bear Claw lifted his skirt, his rod was already firm for her. He turned her around, and plunged hard into her.

Her eyes rolled to the back as she clenched the fur beneath her. It was painful, the force he had thrust into her. But it felt so good as the pain reduced. Then he began to move. He gave her deep and long thrusts. It was hard. And she wanted more. She wanted him to take all of her in a way she had never been taken. He grabbed her breasts, squeezing them hard as he pounded harder into her. Her body leaned towards him, desperate to touch him.

“More!” she whispered, desperate for more of the pleasure.

Bear Claw groaned. She was just so unbelievable. Full of warmth. So tight. He buried himself deeper in her, groaning quietly, competing with her need for silence. His rock stiffened, and he exploded his seed into her. Her body collapsed underneath him, with her taking soft breaths of contentment. He pulled her to him and placed a kiss on her lips.

“I will always protect you,” Bear Claw swore.

She flashed him a weak smile as her eyes closed to sleep.

Chapter 12

Hannah stirred, her eyes opening slowly. She stared at Bear Claw who laid next to her, naked. Ever since they had started having sex, he never covered up. He had suggested she do the same, but her face had turned red. There was no way she could sleep naked, even if he had told her it was the best way. Her eyes went to his rod, and her face turned red. Even though he was asleep, it was erect.

She stared at it. With deep thoughts. She was curious about it. His rod had caused her a lot of pleasure. Slowly and shaking, her hand reached for it. He stirred in his sleep at the contact. It was thick, her fingers could not wrap around it. And all flesh, she thought with a giggle.

Her fingers ran through the length of it. Softly. Slowly. He groaned as they caressed the tip of it. She was growing moist already. She who prior had not had sex before, had had more sex in the past days than in her entire lifetime.

“Hannah.”

She looked to him. He stared at her with desire in his eyes. She caressed his tip again and he growled. His eyes widened as her head lowered to him.

“Hannah!” The last thing he had expected was to wake up to the curiosity of Hannah concerning his rod. All his thoughts flew into the distance at the warm breath of her mouth. She was curious as her tongue flicked out to taste him. And then another taste while her fingers massaged his balls. It was an excruciating torture as he anticipated her next move.

He growled, his fingers digging into her hair as her mouth covered the tip of his rod. She was so warm. So... she took him deeper in her mouth. His eyes closed as she took another inch of his. The wetness of her mouth was driving him insane.

His eyes flung open as he looked at the sight before him. Her porcelain skin had gotten tanned, but she was lighter than he was. Her gorgeous mouth took every inch of him slowly into her.

He could feel her throat. She moaned as she took all of him in, sucking on him like she needed him to survive the day. He held her firmly, but gentle enough not to hurt her. Then he began to move, shoving himself in and out of her mouth. Her eyes flew open and they held gaze as she sucked on him. She was indeed a beautiful sight.

He groaned, pushing into that mouth of hers. She was so desirable. All night they had fucked, and yet he still wanted her.

Her eyes widened as he stiffened in her. And then he filled her

with his hot seed. He gasped as she did not let him go. She took all of his seed in her, every last drop of him.

He looked at her with pride. She was definitely the one for him. The spirits had chosen right.

After breakfast, their training resumed. Bear Claw had taken it upon himself to teach Hannah how to fight. He hoped the day would never come when she needed it, but it was better she had the training.

His arm around her, he showed her how to pull at the arrow. In front of them was a tree which was their shooting range. She pulled the arrow with his help and it hit the tree, a few inches from their mark.

"You are getting better," he said.

She rolled her eyes. "You are a bad liar." She was really excited about this training. It gave her something to do, and to spend time around him. Most of all, it provided her with the protective skills she needed when she finally escaped. She would not be out in the desert unprotected. If Bear Claw thought she had given up on her plans of escaping, he was very wrong. He made her feel good. And special. But she did not belong here, even though the people had finally warmed up to her. However, one day, they would turn on her, and she would be a stranger. She was the white devil, and the people hated her kind. Chua's attempt to assault her was a reminder of their hate.

He watched her as she pulled at the arrow on her own. She might not make the perfect warrior, but with a few more training and she would be able to stop anyone that intended to hurt her.

After, he showed her how to use a dagger. He gave her the dagger he had first used as a boy. It had grown blunt with years.

"Strike at important points," Bear Claw said.

"Where?" she inquired as she put up a fighting stance.

"Here." He pointed at his neck. "Here." He pointed at his ribs. "Here." He pointed at his ear. She giggled when he pointed at his groin, and he chuckled. "It weakens a man more than you can tell." He pointed at his ankle. "And here. Weaken a man, and you can escape," he said with seriousness. She was not strong enough to take on a big man his size, but if she grievously weakened one of them, she would be able to get away. That was if the man was alone, and not with companions. But he hoped there would never be an opportunity for her to defend herself.

She attacked him, wielding the dagger. With a move, he had her on the ground, breathing deeply underneath him. Her breasts pushed up, and he stared at them with desire.

"Auch!" he groaned as she hit him gently in the groin. "Why did you do that?" he glared.

She smiled at him. "I only did what you taught me."

He chuckled, pulling her to him, planting a kiss on her lips. There was a clearing of throat and they pulled apart, Hannah looking embarrassed. She had told him that where she came from, people did not display affections in public. But here, they hid nothing about their sexuality, for sex was seen as a free gift of pleasure to be partaken in.

“Aiyana shall teach you how to fight a woman,” Bear Claw said.

His sister did not look excited. He’d had to bribe with her a fur to convince her to teach Hannah. He felt it best that she practice with a man, and a woman of her kind.

“Okay,” Hannah said, flashing a smile at the woman. Aiyana returned it. She had not warmed up totally to her, but they were civil. On the other hand, White Dove was sweet to her, and they tried to have conversations despite the language barrier.

Bear Claw took a step back, watching them. Aiyana went for the kill, punching her in the shoulder.

“Ouch!” Hannah glared.

The woman smiled, perhaps the first real smile she had ever seen. “You learn. I teach.”

Bear Claw did not interfere. Despite her reservations towards Hannah, his sister would not hurt her. She knew better.

“Teaching the white devil how to fight,” Anika said, sliding next to him.

“Yes,” he said, his body going still. The woman had avoided him for some days after the incidence, as if fearing that he would retaliate. In the past days, she had been more daring, throwing him admiring looks. He simply ignored her.

“She’s weak.”

No, she wasn’t. She may not be hardened like the women of his clan. Compared to most of them, she had lived a luxury life in a house with a roof, with several amenities not in use by his people. However, she was not weak. She was a strong woman who had gone through a lot.

“Our women are taught at birth to defend themselves. She waits till she’s an old maiden,” Anika said with distaste. “You train her to protect herself from the enemies, but what if you are the enemy?”

He went still at her words, throwing a look at her. Anika smiled.

“She will escape again. She does not belong here. And this time, she will not return, for you have given her the way out.”

With that, she turned around and left, leaving the damage to his thoughts behind. He watched the women spur. Despite her intention to upset him, Anika was right. Her being able to protect herself would give her a better edge of returning home safely. What if

she used the knowledge, he taught her against him? Against his people?

She would still escape. He expected this from her. And while she acted like she was a part of the clan, it was just a matter of opportunity and she would flee. He stared at her. They had shared a bed. He had tasted all of her. He had seen her in a vulnerable state. He would know her body in the dark. Yet, she sought to leave. The thought filled him with sudden rage. What more did she want from him? He had given her his body and his heart.

His head lowered, not in defeat, but in acceptance. He was not giving up on her. He never would. He loved her. He would try to convince her to stay. But if she left, then it was meant to be.

Aiyana was not taking it easy on her. She came at her with will. For the first few minutes, Hannah had fallen on her butt. And had retaliated with anger at the woman, only to end up on her butt again. However, she had quickly learned. She had looked at the steps she took, and imitated them. At her first punch, the woman had staggered. And then Aiyana smiled at her.

“You learn,” Aiyana said.

They practiced some more, and she ended up with several bruises and sores. She wished she didn’t have them, but they were a small price to pay for protecting herself. She looked around for Bear Claw when they were done, but he had left. The last time she had seen him, he had been talking to that woman. She wondered what they had been talking about. It was none of her business. She was not the jealous type. He could do what he wanted. Then why did she feel like pulling the other woman’s hair?

She wore a frown as she joined her friends. Deer Fawn had introduced her friend, Black Bird, and now the three of them hung around. She barely had friends back home, and although they taught her how to speak their language, and she taught them English, there was a bit of a language barrier, but they understood each other. The women had taught her how to cook their food, and she was teaching them how to make clothes, which was a bit of a task since they had no needle or a thread. However, the women were interested in learning and she was determined to teach them.

“You sore?” Black Bird asked.

Hannah nodded.

“Aiyana a fighter. A good one,” Deer Fawn said.

She had suspected the woman had taken it easy on her. Otherwise she would have more bruises and would not be able to walk.

The woman chatted, and she was lost in her thoughts. She had been here for almost three month. It still stunned her when she

thought of it. That long and no one had come for her? Did it mean that her family had not survived and made it out of the trail? Or did it mean that that her family did not care to look for her? She had hoped if she was not able to escape on her own, a search party would be sent for her. None of the two had happened.

Would she ever leave here? Or she would spend the rest of her life here? Unlike before, the thought of it didn't make her shudder, or leave her scared. There was just indifference, but she refused to accept the feeling.

What future did she even have here? An inner voice asked, what future did you have back home, or in California? Back home, before her mother had married Samuel, she had thought she would end up an old maiden, looking after her mother. And on the trail, she had no clear plan, but set up a seamstress shop when they got to California. Her future had always seemed uncertain and bleak.

A future here with these people and their ways? With Bear Claw, until he got tired of her? This made her frown. Someday, he would discard her. He would take one of the women like Anika as a wife, and she would be cast aside. Or worse, he would kidnap another woman like her. How would she fend when she was casted off? He had been protecting her, and when she was no longer under his protection, how would the people treat her? She was not blind to the fact that many still did not like her. Especially his friend Juh. He barely talked to her, and his gaze unsettled her. She was always eager to be out of his sight. Life for a white devil woman like her would be cruel, and she would be exposed to a homeless life, target to the likes of Chua.

She laughed, earning surprised looks from her friends. She had lived a quiet drab life with no action. She had hoped a couple of times to have an exciting life like those women who went undercover as spies, or who owned establishments. She had yearned for some sort of fun to shake up her too ordinary life. Indeed, her life had taken a different direction, it was one she had never seen coming, and one she was not excited with. With all that had happened, it seemed she would rather have back her ordinary life. The grass wasn't always greener on the other side.

*

"How is your woman?" Sparrow asked, when he stepped into her.

A child was sick, and for the past days, the old woman nursed over the child with herbs and prayers to the spirits to heal the child. It hurt him to see the fragile child take slow and deep breaths.

"She fares well. How is the child?"

Sparrow's face fell, a sign that all was not well. This was not

the first child to die of such symptoms. Moons ago, another child had died with the same disease. And the moon before. However, this was the third time this moon a child would be sick with the same illness. The people thought it was a curse. A warning from the spirits. They had tried to appease them with sacrifices in the past, yet it persisted. He feared it was not from the spirits, and that it would continue to spread amongst the children until a cure was found.

"I have not seen anything like this," Sparrow said

She had vast experience, and it foretold that danger brewed ahead. If the disease spread, how would it be handled? He recalled an illness that had spread moons ago when he had been a boy, at a village thousands of miles away. All the children, except few had died in a matter of weeks. That would not be their fate, he prayed. They would find a cure to this illness, and put an end finally to it.

"How long does she have?" He had been there when the little girl, Ela was born. He had been there at her naming. He had watched her play around with the other children. And now she laid as a little sick bundle. Her mother was in a devastated state, crying all day as she prayed to the spirits not to take her child. She would be broken if the spirits did not heed to her prayers.

"Two days if we do not find a solution," Sparrow said, her voice ladled with sadness.

He emerged from the teepee with a sad aura. He wished he could help the child, but what could he do? Sparrow had tried all the herbs she knew. They had sent for the shaman in the next village, he had come and gone, saying the child was gone, the illness was a curse and could not be healed. It seemed the child's state had been sealed.

"What troubles you?" Hannah asked when he entered the tepee.

"A child is dying. Ela," he said.

Her eyes widened. She knew the child. Ela played with her, but she had not seen the child in the past days. "What happened?"

He explained to her about the recurring disease every year amongst the children, and how there was not a cure for the illness.

"What are the symptoms?"

He stared at her blankly.

"I mean, does the child cough? Sweat?"

Now he understood her. "Fever. Shaking. Rashes."

Her ears perked up at the last. Those symptoms sounded quite familiar to her. "Can I see the child?"

He looked at her warily. She was no doctor. Neither was she a nurse. But she had a younger brother, and two step-siblings, so she knew her way around children.

"Follow me," Bear Claw said.

The parents of the child were outside when they arrived. He

spoke to them about Hannah seeing the child. The mother shook her head several times. She mentioned white devil repeatedly, and Hannah could tell she didn't want her around the child.

"Your daughter is dying. What do you have to lose?" Bear Claw asked, with a firm look.

That made her burst into tears, resting on her husband's chest, who glared at Bear Claw. But he was just being honest. At this moment, the child was close to the other side. Anything they could do mattered.

"Let her see her," the woman said in tears.

He took Hannah's arm, gently leading her into the teepee. This was the first time Hannah would be inside. She had heard tales of it. Everyone, including the brave young men kept away unless they were ill and needed Sparrow's attention. They respected and most of all feared her. Dark magic, Deer Fawn had said, she associated with. Someone had once said they saw her in the full moon naked in the forest with the blood of a goat all over her. She didn't know if the rumors were true, but she was in awe of the woman.

The tepee was jam-packed. Every inch was covered with bottles, pots or one storage item or another. There were statues, wooden totems that gave her a chill. Hovering above a child with a plant was the woman murmuring some words.

The last time she had seen the girl, she had looked healthy. Now she was frail, with rashes all over her body. Tears welled in her eyes, and she could not help but understand what the child's mother had been going through ever since her child fell ill. She may not be a mother, but she had a younger brother she worried about.

"She wants to help," Bear Claw said, standing behind her.

Sparrow's eyes flung to her. She gasped at the intensity of her gaze. It was like the older woman could see right through her. In that moment, she could not help but accept that some of those rumors had some truth to them.

"Have you seen this before?" the woman asked in broken English.

She moved closer to the child, her eyes running through her. She nodded. "Yes I have."

"Did the child die?" Bear Claw asked.

"Some children die. When it is too late," Hannah said. If scarlet fever went on for a long time, it could affect the immune system of a child and she would die. But if treated fast, the child may survive. "How long has she been sick?" Hannah asked.

"Three days," Bear Claw said.

There was still enough time, but if the child continued this way, with little nourishment, she would die.

“Can you heal her?” Bear Claw asked, with hope.

When her brother had the fever, they had thought he would die, since he had been affected when he was very little, more than when most children had it when they were older. Mary had also come down with it, and Hannah had been the one to care for them, as her mother had been sick at the time. There was a bit of a problem though. The supplies she had used for her siblings would not be easy to come by out here. But they might be able to get alternatives. She looked around the packed fill room.

“I believe it is scarlet fever,” Hannah said.

“Scarlet fever?” Sparrow asked.

Bear Claw frowned. He had heard about this cholera. It was a dangerous disease, which also affected the white devils. It mostly affected the children.

“Yes. And it spreads fast. We need to find those she has been in contact with and see if they are sick,” Hannah said. “But first, we must attend to her.”

“What do you need?” Sparrow asked.

“Saltwater. Fluid. She has to drink them all day. We need to take her out to fresh air,” Hannah said. The windows had been opened back home to allow cool air in for ventilation. “Do you have anything for fever?”

Sparrow nodded.

“Then let’s get started,” Hannah smiled.

The little girl was first bathed in warm water with a mixture of honey and salt. Her body shivered as Hannah soothed her with lullabies she used to sing for her younger ones. Then she wrapped her with thicker clothes. A small tepee was placed by the river, with the little girl in it. With Hannah’s guidance, the little girl gargled repeatedly with warm saltwater. Then she gave the child the roots Sparrow provided.

A while later, a tired Hannah stared at the sleeping child who was sleeping peacefully. They had rubbed some oil all over her body. It would take days, but they rashes would fade away.

She turned to Bear Claw who looked tired as well. She could tell he had bad news. “Four other children are sick,” Bear Claw said. They did not show clear signs but he had told the parents to check all over them for rashes as Hannah had instructed. Two of the children had been complaining of sore throats. The other two had rashes.

“They will be fine,” Hannah said, placing a hand on his chest. “But we need to stop the spread.”

He agreed with this. A sick village was an invitation for death and war. The disease affected mostly the children, but that didn’t mean the adults were safe.

“Gather all items that have been used by the children in the past days. We burn them. Everyone has to wash their hands.”

He grimaced at this. His people were not used to such a life. But they valued their children, and they would do anything to stop the spread. Now that he thought about it, it was a wonder more children had not died in the past years. Or perhaps, those deaths had been overlooked. They did have their own share of infants’ deaths, which were blamed on the spirits.

“Cleanliness is important. We wash utensils. We wash our hands. We do all that to prevent the spread of the fever,” Hannah said.

It was late at night when they retired to their teepee. Hannah was totally tired. She had spent all day caring for the children. Thankfully, they were all getting better, and in a few days, they would join the rest of the village.

Her eyes opened half-way as Bear Claw pulled her to him, his arm around her waist. “Thank you,” he said. He was proud of her. He had seen her take charge and ensure that the children were attended to properly. He had never seen her spring to action that way.

Hannah managed a shrug. There was no need to be thanked. She had just done what needed to be done. Those children had been sick, and it was within her power and experience to be of help. She would never let the children go through such pain. Despite Samuel meanness, she had been good to his children, treating them like her siblings, even when their father had tried to poison their minds against her. Mary was a sweet child who had bonded with her. However, Thomas walked in his father’s footsteps, in his attempts to please his father. But she saw him as a young boy who needed loving.

Her eyes closed, and she quickly reached out for sleep. Bear Claw watched her as she breathed softly. He marveled at how blessed he was to have her in his life. They would have lost the children today and in the next couple of days if not for her. And the deaths would have continued. Now that they knew what ailed the children, they would be prepared for the next time. He planted a kiss on her head and she stirred with a smile, whispering his name.

*

The next morning presented itself with gifts. Hannah woke up to a basket of fruits in front of the teepee. It was from Ela's parents. The mother was in tears as she thanked Hannah. She was grateful to her for saving her child. Angel, she called her several times, and Hannah smiled. She was no angel.

More gifts arrived that morning, a handmade blanket, some trinkets, more fruits, and even a bowl of delicious stew. As she walked through the village, many called out to her in greetings. There were even though who stopped to greet and thank her for what she had

done.

It was overwhelming. She had done nothing much. If they encountered a real doctor, she wondered what they would do.

“You have earned their trust,” Deer Fawn said, walking next to her.

She didn’t know why but she was happy that she had been accepted. Regardless of the circumstances that had brought her here, she had lived amongst these people and had a soft spot for them. She had partaken in their meals. She had learned their culture and traditions. She knew most of them by names. She knew their history. She knew the families that made up the village. Without even meaning to, without realizing it, she had become one of them. The thought made her freeze. Weeks ago, she had thought frantically about escaping. But with every day that went by, her desire to escape reduced. It was like she had accepted her fate, and slowly resigned herself to this life. The thought scared her. Would she really abandon her family because of this people? How had this even happened? How had she opened her heart to them?

Deer Fawn looked at her worried, and she flashed a smile at the woman, yet thoughts consumed her mind. She really didn’t know what to do now. Everything had become complicated.

She went to the teepee but couldn’t find Bear Claw there. She just wanted to be in his arms. She knew it would make her feel better. She turned around and walked right into Anika. The woman wore a confident smile. Hannah didn’t like it.

“What do you want?” Hannah asked in the native language.

Anika looked surprised. Hannah smiled. She had been learning fast.

“Your people have come for you,” Anika said.

It was like the world had stopped to exist at the other woman’s words. “My people?” she asked with a quiver in her voice.

“White devils come for you,” Anika spat next to her. “You leave. He mine.”

She walked away with her smile intact. Hannah’s entire body shook. She did not want to believe it. The woman had to be lying, but as she looked around the village, there was a stillness to it. The children and women were nowhere to be found. She could hear the birds clearly as they flew overhead. Anika had not been lying.

As she made her way through the village, it was silent, yet she could feel the eyes peeking, and the ears listening. Her heart pounded as she raced towards the gates. They were closed, mounting them were more warriors than usual. They blocked her way.

“Let me through!” she glared at one of them. He did not budge. “Let me through!” her voice was louder.

There was a ruckus out in the front and the gates were pushed open. She gasped as she stared into the face of a white devil, one of hers. It was true. They had come for her. Her eyes rested on Bear Claw who looked angry.

"Go back Hannah!" Bear Claw snapped. Why had the men let her through?

"Ms. Hannah Thornton?" the man asked. He was dressed like a constable.

"Yes, that's me," she said breathlessly.

"Hannah."

Her face swerved and for the first time she was relieved to see her stepfather. The man had gotten plump since the last time she saw him.

"We heard reports that you were here, but the chief denied it," the officer said, glaring at Bear Claw.

"This is my territory, you will leave now," Bear Claw said with steel in his voice. His men stiffened at his words, ready to fight if they were instructed.

"We came for the woman. You cannot keep her a prisoner," the officer said.

"She's not a prisoner. Ask her," Bear Claw said softly.

All eyes rested on Hannah. Bear Claw. The warriors. The officer. Samuel. And the other men in the party. Her eyes lowered. And she said nothing. For he was right, she was not a prisoner.

"Bollocks! She has lain with the savage!" Samuel spat with disgust.

Bear Claw reached for him in the speed of lightning, grabbing the man in his hold. Samuel's face turned red, and delight leapt in Hannah as he stuttered.

"Let go of him. You will not lay your hand on any of us," the official threatened.

"Please Bear Claw," Hannah said softly, placing a hand on his shoulder.

He let go of Samuel, pushing him to the ground. The man glared at him and then at Hannah. "I should never have listened to your mother pleas to look for you. You are as good as dead."

Bear Claw took a step forward, but Hannah pulled him back.

"Ms. Thornton, you have not answered my question. We have several reports that you were abdicated by these men, and brought here. By law you were kidnapped, and you shall be returned home," the officer said.

"She goes nowhere!" Bear Claw said. Never! He was never letting her out of his sight. She belonged to him. He pulled her to him.

"Then we will return with more men and raze your village to

the ground. Kill all your women and children,” the man said with a cruel smile.

Hannah gasped. He wouldn't do that, would he? But the look on his face showed he was capable of such destruction. She had heard of how villages had been destroyed, lineages wiped off the earth because of her people.

“We will defend ourselves from your kind,” Bear Claw said, holding Hannah tighter. They would increase the security, have more men patrol, even move settlement if needed, but Hannah remained with him.

“You have brainwashed her. Blackmailed her. And she fears you. We will not let anyone of us be manipulated by you savages,” the man eyes moved past his men.

He glared at him, ready to run a knife through him. They had come with a small party, and could kill and bury them, without anyone knowing of their whereabouts. He stared questioningly at Hannah as she forcefully removed herself from him.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

She lifted her eyes to him and his heart fell. There were tears in them. “I am sorry,” she whispered.

He shook his head. No! She couldn't do this to him. “You belong with me!” he said in his language.

“No, I belong with my people,” Hannah said.

He reached for her, but a rifle from one of the white devils was pointed at him. He took a step back.

Hannah had words to say, but she held them back, tears in her eyes. She wanted to hug him one last time. To kiss him goodbye, but the atmosphere was too tense. There was anger in his eyes. Perhaps even hate.

“We will take you home Ms. Thornton away from these savages,” the officer said as he firmly held her hand. He led her to a horse, as both groups, the Indians and her people watched each other warily, their weapons within their reach.

He lifted her on a horse, and just as she sat on it, Bear Claw leapt forward. He groaned as he was struck in the head by the butt of a rifle.

“Bear Claw!” she called out to him, just as the horse moved.

“Hannah!” Bear Claw cried, wincing in pain. He watched her go. He watched his heart ride away from him, and he knew he would never be the same again.

Chapter 13

Hannah had stopped crying. Inside she felt numb. All she could think about was Bear Claw in anguish as she was taken away. She had never been so broken before, a piercing pain in her chest she thought her heart was going to explode.

The men talked and laughed in the group that had come to rescue her. Her stepfather threw her haughty looks, but she ignored him. The man she rode with had asked her several questions. Intruding questions, without any respect for her privacy.

“Did he rape you?” he asked.

“No,” she said. He had never used force on her.

“So you went to bed with him on your own will?” he asked with disgust.

She said nothing. How could she tell him that the so-called savages were even better than they were? That the people were kind and caring? He would not believe her.

“How many men are in the camp?” the man asked.

“Many,” she shrugged.

“What weapons do they have?”

She went stiff at this. She was not going to give him any information that would destroy the clan.

“How long would it take for us to get to my mother?” Hannah asked.

“A day perhaps. We might have to sleep under the sky. I suppose it would be no shock to you with all you have been up to,” the officer said.

Her teeth gritted. She reminded herself that he was an officer of the law. And she was surrounded by his men. As much as she would love to give him a good tongue lashing, he certainly wasn’t worth it.

Evening descended upon them, bringing with it the cold. The other men shivered around her, but her shawl protected her. She was tired. She was drained physically and mentally.

“We are close,” the man behind her said.

She lifted her eyes and saw the houses in the distance spread apart from each other. The wind had picked up, foretelling that a storm was near.

The town was developing with many of the houses still under construction. Tents were spread around to house people until the constructions were complete. The sound of hammering filled the evening as the men continued to work. She could feel eyes on them as they made their way through the town. They stopped in front of a

storied building. In front of it were the flags of the confederate.

"You will see the chief constable first," the officer said. He helped her off the horse as the other men tied their horses. He went into the building leaving her alone.

She was supposed to feel relief right? That she was among her people. But all she felt was an emptiness.

"Jezebel!" Samuel spat.

She had hoped he would continue to keep away from her.

"You are a vulture. You laid with those dirty creatures. How many of them did you spread your legs for?" he sneered as he gripped her arm.

The old her would have winced as she tried to set herself free. She lifted her knee, hitting him in the groin.

"Ahhhh!" Samuel groaned as he quickly let go of her, his hands on his groin. "You witch!" he lunged at her and she was prepared to knock him out when the officer returned, standing in the middle. "The constable wants to see you," he said to Hannah, throwing a warning look at Samuel.

At the front was a small office with a woman clacking away on a typewriter. She stared at Hannah with interest. Hannah pegged her for the town's gossip, she knew many of her kind already.

Constable Elliot was a tall man, hovering above her. But he was not as tall as Bear Claw. Neither was he as good looking. The constable was an older man, in his fifties, dressed in his uniform. He came around the table and took her in his arms gently.

"Ms. Thornton, I am delighted that you have returned to us," he said. "We feared that you were dead. But we received Intel that you were with the Apache clan."

Intel? She was curious about that. "Thank you for having your men look for me," Hannah said. She wished they had come sooner. In the first week she had arrived. Not now when things had changed and she had been happy.

He led her to a chair and reached for a decanter which he poured into a glass. He offered her but she shook her head.

"My officer here tells me there was a little drama when they tried to take you," the constable said.

Of course. She remained quiet.

"I want you to be sincere, if you were hurt, coerced, I assure you that they will pay," he said with a steeliness that transformed his face.

"I was not hurt," Hannah said. Why did they choose to believe that the Indians were monsters who would hurt her? It was a silly notion they had. However the people were calm and didn't attack until provoked.

"You had willful affairs with him?" He did not sound so shocked at least.

"I did."

Both men stared at her like they would an alien. She wondered if they regretted coming to look for her.

"Is that all? I am tired. And I would like to see my family," Hannah said, covering a yawn.

"We will continue our conversation when you are well rested. Welcome home once again Ms. Thornton," the constable said.

The officer followed her out. The woman at the front looked at them curiously.

"Where's my mother?" Hannah asked. She was scared that her mother was dead. Every question she had asked about her family had been left unanswered.

"We will go to them," the officer said.

"At last! I need to wash off the stench of those barbarians," Samuel said, joining them.

"It is just a few minutes walk," the officer said when she headed towards the horse. She fell beside him, and he led the way, Samuel grumbling behind them with the horse.

They stopped in front of a building. The night had already descended but the streetlights were on.

"This is where they are," the officer said.

Hannah stared at the brown door. Her heart raced in excitement. What was going to be behind that door? She feared for what she would see. Her...

The door opened. She gasped. Her mother stood at the doorway. Crying, she went into her mother's arms. The woman hugged her tight, tears spilling from her eyes.

"You are home," Regina said in tears. "You are home."

She had missed her mother so much. It seemed like it had been forever since she last saw her. She pulled away from her. Her mother was gaunt, with sharpness in her face. She looked sick, with bags under her eyes.

"I am recovering," her mother said, reading the questions. She looked behind her to the officer. "Thank you for bringing her home."

"It was a pleasure," the officer said with a nod. They watched him go, with quick strides as if eager to get away from them.

"Your daughter is a prostitute!"

She had forgotten all about him. Hannah sighed. And to think she had even thought she had missed him.

"What do you mean?" her mother asked.

"She laid with all those barbarians. She let them defile her," Samuel said, his voice filled with excitement.

"How have you been mother?" Hannah asked. "Where's my brother?"

A cry from the inside, and the two women went in, ignoring Samuel who continued to call Hannah names. It was a small house, with a decent room. Their belongings were packed together and there was barely any space.

"We will get a bigger place," her mother said, noticing her look around.

Relief settled on Hannah when she saw her brother. He stopped crying when he saw her, reaching out to her. Fresh tears welled in her eyes as she held him in her hands. He laughed when she made a funny face.

"Hannah."

Her stepsister hugged her from the side and she hugged her back. She ruffled the girl's hair and she clung harder to her.

"Where's Thomas?" she asked, looking around.

The silence she received scared her. Even Samuel who had followed them in was silent.

"He died," Regina said, with heaviness in her voice.

Hannah was weak. Thomas was dead? She looked to her mother for confirmation. Her mother nodded.

"How?" she asked. The last time she had seen him he had been a healthy boy, full of life. Had... Had the kidnap caused his death?

"He became very sick when we arrived here—"

"Those savages caused his death!" Samuel snapped.

"He was sick even before the journey began," little Mary said. "He did not want to tell you because he feared you would beat him."

Samuel stared at his daughter angrily. "Shut up! You know nothing."

"Pneumonia," her mother said.

She blinked back tears. Poor Thomas. He had been stubborn, but he had been sweet and protective. She would not forget the day they were returning from the market and had been ambushed by some men. The boy, younger than her and the men had puffed his chest with pride and dared any of the men to tease his sister.

"I am sorry," Hannah said to everyone in the room. To Mary who had lost her brother and best friend. To her mother who had lost a child. And to Samuel who hid his sorrow with anger.

"You look well," her mother caressed her face.

Indeed she did; of the four of them, she looked the healthiest with a tan that blended with her skin.

"They fed her to be plucked!" Samuel sneered.

"Samuel!" her mother scolded.

"What? You force me out to bring back your prostitute of a

daughter. She should not be here. I don't want her here. God should have taken her instead of my boy." His voice shook and without even staring at him, she knew he had tears in his eyes. He dragged his feet to the door and it shut loudly behind him.

"Mama," Hannah said staring at her mother with fondness. She had missed her so much. "What happened? After I... I was taken?"

Her mother sat down and she handed her wiggling brother to her. Mary sat next to her.

"Can you believe that we were on the wrong trail?" her mother asked with a small smile.

"No way!"

"True. We thought we were going to die. The wagon had been ripped apart. Then one of the men asked in barely understandable English where we were going. I told him. They led us down another path. We... We thought they were going to kill us. I was so worried about you Hannah." Her mother flicked a tear away. "I have been unable to sleep since that day. Unable to eat. All I have thought of was how you fared. What they... They would do to you. If you were even still alive."

"Papa said you were dead. That they did harm to you and slit your throat," Mary said.

"But I could sense you were alive. You are strong and I knew you would fight to be alive," her mother smiled with tears.

Her mother went on to tell her about how the men had left them on the trail. A few more minutes and the horses had given up on them. They were stranded, with barely any food, and no horses, Regina had feared that this was the end for them. Samuel had rounded the family up and told them they might have to kill one of them to survive out there.

Hannah's eyes boggled at this. "No, he did not!"

The serious look in her mother's eyes said otherwise. Why was she not even surprised? Her eyes fell on her brother and she knew he would be the choice Samuel made. He would not decide on any of his children. Or Regina because he would not be able to take of the child alone.

"He had made a decision when... We heard a sound. We hid. I thought they had returned. With you."

"But it was the officers. They were out on... On..."

"Patrol," her mother completed for Mary. "They brought us here which wasn't even far off."

They would have known if Samuel had been a man and explored the lands. Instead, he had deliberated feeding on his youngest child.

"We told them about you. I told them to go after you.

Immediately. But... They said it was dangerous. That they would be expecting them. A trap..."

Every day, her mother spoke to the constable to go in search of her. And with every day that went by, the constable was convinced that she was no more.

"He called them savages. That they rape, kill and feast on the bodies of those they take. He didn't want to risk his men on such a cause," her mother frowned.

Yet she had lived and had been hopeful that they would come for her. No wonder it took them this long. If they had taken action that very day, she would have not stayed that long with Bear Claw and his people.

"I never gave up on you," her mother smiled, taking her hand. "I didn't care what the outcome was. If you were alive, or dead, I just knew I could not give up on you."

Her mother continued to plead with the constable who at a point shut the door of his office to her. And then, she turned to her husband.

"It isn't something I am proud of. But I threatened him," Regina said.

No way! Her mother had stood up to her husband.

"I told him I would leave if he did not go out for you. I began to put our things together. That made him see the constable and sweet talk him. He sent a few scouts around..."

Those scouts had returned with no news. No one had seen her. The premise was that she was dead, at the hands of the men who had taken her.

"What changed?" Hannah asked.

"One of them told us you were alive. That you were being kept a prisoner by the tribe," her mother said.

She froze at her mother's words. One of them? It had to be Chua! He must have tried to payback for the event that happened that day in the forest.

"She was the one who led us to you."

She? Her heart raced in excitement. There was only one female she could think of. A female who had never liked her, and would do anything to get her out of the way. Anika.

The realization shocked her. It had not been by sheer luck that they had found her. No wonder she had been repeatedly asked questions. It was because Anika had given them false information.

The nerve of her! The village could have been destroyed. Bear Claw could have been killed all because of her jealousy. How much she wanted to see her one last time and pull at her hair. Now that she was gone, she would present her body to him to warm his fur. The

thought made her want to scream. Would he lay with her? Images of both of them together increased her anger.

“Hannah?”

She stared into the worried eyes of her mother.

“What happened?” her mother asked.

She surprised both herself and her mother by bursting into tears. Her mother pulled her into an embrace. “You are safe now. It will be fine. I am sorry I did not protect you. We should never have gone on this trip,” her mother said.

Yes, they shouldn’t have. Thomas was dead. She had been kidnapped. So much had happened that would have been best avoided if they had not come on this trip. Or even better, if they had come with a wagon train. A solo trip had been an invitation to every bandit out there. But Samuel had insisted and even threatened them.

“I don’t want to talk about it. About what happened. Not yet,” Hannah said. She wasn’t ready to talk about all that had happened at the village. The wound was too fresh. And she doubted it would ever heal.

“All that matters is that you are home,” her mother said, pulling her into a tight hug.

She rested her head on her mother chest. However, she didn’t share the same thought as her mother. It didn’t feel good to be home, when her heart was miles away.

Chapter 14

The village was quiet. It was morning and yet there was no pounding of food, there was no laughter. There was nothing. Or perhaps Bear Claw was oblivious to it all.

He had been unable to sleep. He had barely eaten for days. How could he when his woman had been taken away from him? Worse, she had gone with them, he reminded himself. Her betrayal had caused a rip in his heart. He would have fought for her, killed whoever stood in his way. But she had let go of him and left him.

He had never felt such heartache before. Not even when he lost his father. And his mother followed soon after. It felt like his heart had been ripped from within him and tossed aside. All he felt was emptiness and pain.

This was the first time in years he would stay in this late in his teepee. He was an early riser but he laid on the fur, thoughts flowing through his mind. His head still throbbed from where he had been hit. How much he would have liked to retaliate, but at what cost? They would return and the innocents would pay. Besides, she had left of her own will. She was not worth fighting for, he tried to convince himself.

He looked up at a rustling sound. It was his sisters. They looked worried.

“What do you want?” he wanted to be left alone.

“I am sorry. About what happened,” Aiyana said on behalf of them.

He chuckled bitterly. Why were they sorry? Hadn’t they warned him? Was this not what they wanted?

“Leave,” Bear Claw said. They remained. He stood up, glaring at them. He did not want their pity. He was Chief Bear Claw of the tribe of Apache. “Leave!” he said more forcefully.

The flap opened as his sisters departed. He felt like yelling out the pain in him, but it held his back. He emerged from his teepee, out into the morning. He would not hide indoors like a child, sulk and cry. He would face this head on. The spirits had decided a cruel fate for him, but he would not give it to them easily.

“Sachem,” Juh said with surprise as he took the reins of the horse.

“Gather the men. We hunt,” Bear Claw said with firmness, leaving no room for argument.

The men followed him into the forest. He wanted something difficult. More challenging than a buffalo. His horse rode like lightning, his spear in his hand. His eyes looked around carefully,

watching like a hunter. He had picked up tracks of a mountain lion. It was hiding. Watching as well. But Bear Claw had been a hunter all his life. He could smell its stench. He could smell its excitement.

The forest grew denser, the light from above disappearing as the canopies above clustered together. His men were far behind, sensing his mood and staying away. It was just him, on the prowl this morning.

Suddenly, a large shadow pounced on him. It was a big one. The mountain lion. He yelped as he fell off the horse, reaching for his spear. The lion went into the darkness, making the most of it.

He turned around, tracking the scent and footprints. A growl came from behind him. Slowly, he turned around, staring at the eyes which glistened yellow in the dark. Its teeth were bared and it flicked its tongue out. His fingers tightened around the spear at the same time the mountain lion pounced on him.

A wild growl filled the forest, with birds above fluttering away in fear for the destruction beneath.

Bear Claw grunted as he ran the spear through the mountain lion. But the lion was unwillingly. Its fierce teeth dug into his arm. Bear Claw groaned in pain, his arms weakening as he thrust his dagger into the eye of the beast.

The animal screeched wildly, and Bear Claw ran the spear through it again, right through the heart.

The heavy animal dropped to the ground with a thud. His eyes were blurry as he stared at the animal. He felt something wet. He looked to his arm and saw blood gushing. The mountain lion had dug deep.

“Hannah...” he whispered as his legs gave way, his body hitting the ground.

*

Something bad had happened. Hannah could feel it. All day she had this lingering feeling that she could not shake off. It had gotten worse as the morning grew. Suddenly, she was hit with a powerful feeling.

“Bear Claw,” she whispered. She could tell that something bad had happened to him.

“Hannah?”

She turned to her mother. It was only when her mother embraced her that she realized she was shaking.

“What’s wrong?” her mother asked worriedly.

“Bear Claw,” she repeated.

Her mother’s eyes narrowed. “The chief who kidnapped you?”

Hannah nodded. For days she had kept to herself. She knew her mother wanted her to share her experience, especially with Samuel

throwing cruel words at her which she ignored.

"What happened out there? Did he... Hurt you?" her mother asked with concern.

"No... I love him mama," she said as tears pooled in her eyes.

Her mother's eyes widened at her admission. It had taken her some time to realize the truth. But it was true. She loved Bear Claw. Since she was brought here she was in a state of sadness. She could barely function. Laughter was far from her. She missed him, his touch, his scent... She missed all of him. She missed the village and its slow and primitive life. Here, she didn't fit in. She could feel something missing out in her life. Her mother and siblings were here, but this was no longer home. Her home, her place of bliss was with Bear Claw.

Her mother led her to a chair and for the next hour, she poured out her emotions to the woman. As she spoke she realized it was true, she did love the savage. She had never thought it would happen, but it had. Being away from him was excruciating and she felt like she was falling sick, physically and emotionally.

"I knew something had happened. I just didn't think this happened," her mother said when she was done.

"You are disappointed? You think this is wrong? That his people are savages?" she asked.

"I thought that all these while you have been away. So many tales. So many stories many said about them. But then you returned, there was a spark in your eyes. Something I saw a long time ago in myself when your father died. A loss so great it ripped me into two. A spark associated with true love."

Now Hannah was crying, the tears rolling down her face.

"I trust you Hannah. You have always been intelligent. And independent. You were always there for me. I was supposed to be your mother but you cared for me. I couldn't give you the life you deserved —"

"No mama, you have done right by me," Hannah said. Her mother may have been emotionally absent, but she had cared for her.

Regina shook her head. "I allowed my grief consume me. I wish I was a better mother. And that I listened to you about Samuel..."

Well, that she agreed with. Most of the problems they had had began with her mother's marriage to Samuel.

"I want you to be happy, and if that means you be with him, then let it be so."

Hannah frowned. "What do you mean mother?"

"Go to him," her mother said with a sad smile.

"No," she shook her head. She had just come back home. "I can't leave you with him mama. You need me."

"You have always been there for me, but now is time for you to

chase your happiness. I was happy with your father, but I settled for less. You deserve better. I will be okay. I am stronger than you think. Samuel has changed.”

Hannah scoffed. He was still an asshole.

“He’s broken. Defeated. Thomas’ death has shaken him more than he admits. He feels guilt for Thomas’ death, but he hides it with anger.”

“He hurts you mama.”

“I have spoken to him. Remember the fight I talked about?”

Hannah nodded.

“I set some rules. It is taking some time for him to fully change, but he will.”

True, she had noticed that he was more quiet than usual, and that he vented most of his anger on her. He simply just ignored her mother. Yet, she doubted he would change. She would not be surprised if he left one day and never returned.

“I know what you are thinking, but don’t worry about me Hannah. You have worried all about me your life. Now is the time for you to be happy. I don’t care wherever you are. As long as you are happy, I will be happy. And if things don’t work out, you can always come back home. I and your siblings will always be here for you.” Her mother hugged her and she cried in her arms.

Her mother wanted her to be happy, and that meant being away from her. Not getting to see her kid brother grow up. But all of her life, she had always thought of others. Perhaps now was the time to think of herself. She wanted to be with Bear Claw. If he would have her. Would he want her back after she had left him? Or had he turned his eyes to another woman with a more luscious body? Someone like him?

Doubts filled her. How would she survive out there?

“The same way you survived all these months,” her mother said.

She turned red as she realized she had voiced out her fears out loud.

“I know this is a great step to take. I am worried about you as well. But what do you want? Has he ever hurt you? Do you think his people will turn on you?

No, they wouldn’t. They had cultural differences but she knew they would not hurt her. To them, every life was sacred. She may not have been born one of them, but she had gained their respect. Bear Claw would never hurt her. He had always been gentle with her.

In her heart, she knew the right decision to make. A smile spread on her face, the first honest one since she had arrived at the town.

All night, Hannah thought about her decision to leave. By morning the next day, she began to gather her belongings together. As she did, she felt lightweight. There was no restrain or regret in her heart. it felt like this was the right thing to do.

The only horse they had had been taken by Samuel to god knew where. Until they had enough money to buy another horse, and for more, they were going to settle down here. The town had an old preacher who was sick, and Samuel was lobbying to take over from him when he died. They might never get to California, Hannah suspected.

"Ms. Thornton," Officer Raleigh said when she walked into the constable's office.

"Good day officer. I need a horse, and directions," Hannah said. She could see the secretary listening. She had been the one to spread the rumor that Hannah had been in a harem for a chief, pissing Samuel even more. He had returned home drunk calling Hannah names.

"A horse? Where are you going to?" he asked confused.

"Home," she said with a smile.

His confusion only deepened.

"I'm going back to where you met me. I never should have come back..." She was glad she had returned to confirm for herself that her mother and brother were alive. And to tie loose ends. If she had stayed back, she would have gone most of her life wondering about a lot of things.

He looked stunned, and the secretary gasped. "Have you lost your mind?" Officer Raleigh asked. "You want to go back... to that hideous place?"

Indeed, it seemed like she had. While the town was still in its early formation, it was more comfortable than the village, but she would choose the village over the town. Home was where her heart was, and it was with Bear Claw.

"Yes, I want to go back there. Can I get a horse?" Hannah asked.

"I will do no such thing!" Officer Raleigh said fiercely. He tried to stop her as she made her way into the constable's office, but she pushed past him. The constable was enjoying a glass of rum when she walked in.

"Ah! Ms. Thornton, just the person I wanted to speak to. I want to ask some questions about the chief. He's well known, and holds a lot of power in these parts," the constable said with a kind smile, but she knew otherwise.

"I'm not going to help you constable," Hannah said firmly. They were not going to use her to hurt Bear Claw or any of the chiefs.

He looked up at her sharpness, the smile dropping.

"You should understand that we have to know the people better, especially those who are hostile to us. It is just for the betterment of our goals," the constable said.

"I am leaving. I would appreciate if I get a horse," Hannah said.

The constable looked completely shocked. She would have laughed if the situation wasn't so serious.

"Are you crazy?" he asked.

Why did everyone think she was crazy? She rolled her eyes.

"No, I am not. I don't belong here. I belong with him."

"Do you know how stupid that sounds? They are barbarians! They—"

"With your clean clothes and manners, you think you are any different from them?" Hannah scoffed. "You came to their lands, killed those who resisted, stolen what they have, and yet you call them barbarians? How ironic."

He looked away, embarrassed for a moment. "I do not think this is the right thing to do. It is unheard for a woman of a good upbringing to belittle herself to lay with those men."

"I think it is. I just came here for a horse. And directions to find my way home. But if you cannot be of help, I will figure it out," Hannah shrugged. She would buy someone's horse and be on her way.

"Saddle a horse for her," the constable said.

"But sir—"

"Do as I say," the older man snapped.

Hannah returned home with a small wagon. It was shabby with a tired looking horse but it would do. At least she hoped so. She heard raised voices as she got into the house. The conversation between her mother and Samuel ceased.

"You are a disgrace! An embarrassment!" Samuel spat.

She forged on, ignoring him. The hate she felt for him had developed into pity. Now she saw him for the bitter man that he was. One who was angry at the world and at himself.

"Hannah."

She turned to her little sister and hugged her.

"Please don't go," Mary cried.

Hannah ruffled her hair. "I have to go Mary. But I will never forget you. I will come visit." If they remained here, she might visit them, and on one visits bring Bear Claw over.

"You will never step foot in here again!"

Samuel threw.

The females ignored him as they helped Hannah take her things out to the wagon. After two trips, all her things were well tucked in the wagon.

“Mama!” She cried as she said goodbye. May God keep her, she prayed silently. The woman deserved happiness and even though she knew he would never change, perhaps Samuel would make her mother happy.

“You are making the right decision,” her mother said, her eyes filled with tears.

“Am I?” She was giving up her life here to go be with him, but what if he turned her down? What if he wanted nothing to do with her? Or he had found another woman? She might just be returning home in a few hours, back to this town and to Samuel’s torment.

“Yes you are,” her mother smiled.

Her younger brother stretched out his chubby arms and she carried him to her chest. He giggled as she kissed him on the cheek. “I am going to miss you Joseph, but I know mama and Mary are going to take good care of you.”

She pulled away, dabbing at her eyes. It was time to go. But not first without a goodbye to Samuel who glared at her. She smiled at him and he frowned at her suspiciously.

“If you ever hurt my mother, my brother or my sister, I will come for you. And I won’t be alone Samuel,” she promised. The man gulped at her threat. After she had hurt him, he did not come within close proximity. He knew she was not the naive girl she had been before. She had grown physically and mentally.

She turned around and got into the wagon, and without a look back, she commanded the horse to move. The wagon rolled down the streets and she saw many watch her with curiosity. The news must have spread around. She could also sense their animosity. They would not be able to understand how she had fallen in love with a barbarian.

As she rode past the constable’s office, she saw him on the porch with Officer Raleigh. He lifted a hand in a wave and she waved back.

The gates ahead opened, letting her out. Into freedom.

Chapter 15

Hannah was in his arms. They sat by the river laughing and talking. A butterfly rested on her arm and she giggled, freeing herself from him. The butterfly flew away and she followed it.

He screamed at her. He tried to move but he was rooted to the ground. He pointed ahead, at the tornado that was headed towards her. But she was too busy admiring the butterfly.

He screamed as the tornado enveloped her with its darkness.

With a gasp, Bear Claw's eyes opened. He tried to sit up but there was a piercing pain in his arm. He groaned as he stared at it. How? The last thing he remembered was killing the mountain lion. The beast had struck him.

He looked around, he was in his teepee. Sparrow had come to him as he recognized the aroma of her herbs and the salve which has been applied on his injury.

The flap opened and in came Sparrow. He had not realized it but she had gotten older. Time was the greatest enemy, he reminded himself.

She knelt before him and slapped him. Bear Claw groaned as he glared at her.

"You hunted with rage," Sparrow said, slapping him across the face again.

He was chief yet the woman disciplined him whenever he faulted. But she was right. A hunt with anger was prone to loss of one's concentration. He had been too angry and had not tracked the animal well. He should have gone with one of his men but he had wanted to be alone.

"You scared all of us," Sparrow said.

"I am sorry. How long have I been away?" He asked.

"A day. We have been praying to the spirits to return you. I knew they would. Your palm reads of a long journey ahead of you."

Of what use was long life if he could not be with the woman he loved? Fate had been cruel to him. Why had they brought Hannah into his life? She had made him love. She had made him happy. And now he could not even imagine a life without her. What had he ever done to receive such misery?

"The wound heals," Sparrow said as she applied more salve to it. She worked quietly like she usually did. He felt some pain but a few more days and it would be nothing but a bruise.

Done with examining him, Sparrow rose. By the flap, she stopped and turned to him. "Your people have worried for you. Do not

be stupid again.”

His sisters arrived next. And when he saw the fear on their faces, he berated himself for taking stupid actions. He had to have known better. That there were people counting on him. His immediate family. The village. If he died, especially without a grown heir, there would be conflicts as to who would replace him. For now, while peace reigned, death caused strifes.

“We are grateful to the spirits that you are back,” Aiyana said.

Indeed, he was. It was a wound many had died from, but he had survived.

“You promised you would raise my son,” White Dove said, with a frown.

“I will,” Bear Claw said.

“I know it hurts you that the woman is gone, but the spirits will it,” Aiyana said.

He scoffed. “Then why did they show her to me as my mate?” he asked. They looked at him confused, and he explained. “I have seen her in my dreams before I saw her.”

“Ah! She’s the one you dream of.” Seeing his surprise, she continued. “Mother told me. She made me promise to welcome that woman into our home. I have broken my promise,” Aiyana said with a fallen face.

He was not surprised that his mother whom he had trusted had left instructions to her first daughter. She had always known what to do best.

“The spirits know best what they are doing. If it is meant to be, it will be.”

It was later in the day before Bear Claw emerged from his teepee. Many had stopped by to see how he fared, passing the good news from one to another.

He went straight to where the mountain lion hide laid. While he had been unconscious, the hide had been removed from the carcass. It would take weeks of preparing and drying of the hide, but it would become a beautiful fur.

He caressed the skin, taking pride that he had brought the beast down and had survived. That very beast had killed men, both his kind and white devils.

“You continue to show that you are a powerful warrior,” Juh said. “You brought down a beast, the several of many.”

He had killed beasts that tormented his village and the environs, all since he was a young boy. This was just another spoils added to his trophy.

“I apologize my chief that we could not fight to keep the woman,” Juh said.

Bear Claw threw him a sharp look. His friend had never cared about her. He believed she did not belong here.

"The village comes first," Bear Claw said. In everything he did, the village would come first.

"We will find you another woman," Juh clapped him on the back. A cheer of agreement went up amongst the other men. Bear Claw smiled weakly, he did not want any other woman, he wanted Hannah.

Many called out to him as he made his way through the village. He waved to them with smiles. As much as he wished he had fought for her, the lives of his people would have been risk, because they would return to destroy their peace and calm.

He would rather let his heart go, then cause the deaths of thousands of his people. He would learn to mend the hurt and his heart, but the loss of people was something he would never recover from, and which he would continue to feel responsible for.

The head of the mountain lion sat on a stake, at the front gates, as if announcing itself as a prize. However, there was one person he would like to celebrate with.

With his arm, Bear Claw could not go for a horse ride. Or to go hunting. Instead, he went to the children. They looked cheerful and repeatedly asked for Hannah. He smiled sadly at them. It seemed everywhere he turned to, he was reminded of Hannah. Would he ever stop thinking about her? His existence seemed to be loss with her no longer in his life. In a few days, they would join the rest of the village. Thank the spirits, but no one had fallen ill, child or adult. It was not a good time for the village to have an epidemic. There never would be a good time, he corrected.

That night the men and women celebrated. They celebrated his survival from the beast. They sang his praises by the fire, but although his body was there, his heart was with another.

The party progressed into the night. He did not drink, but he ate for sustenance. He excused himself and went to his teepee. He was startled for a moment as he saw Hannah lying there. He saw her naked body as he thrust into her. He heard her moans fill the room as her fingers dug into him. The room felt hot, he hurried outside and ran into Anika, who was startled.

"Sachem," she smiled at him. His eyes raked all over her surplus body. To any other man, it was tempting, but to him he had no interest. One would think after Hannah, he would dine and wine with the woman. But she had ruined him for all women to come. It would take him moons before he laid with another woman.

"Go away," Bear Claw said. He was not in the mood for her drama.

“I am glad that you are alive,” she said.

So was he. Another opportunity to live empty he supposed.

“I offer myself to you. Now that the white devil is gone, you have all of me. I will give you everything you want,” Anika said.

He sighed. He was tired of this back and forth with her. He held her shoulders firmly and she looked up to him expectantly.

“You will always be like a little sister to me. Whatever you want I cannot give you. Look around and take another man for yourself. I do not care for you the way you want. And I will never care for you. She might be gone but I will always love her. And I will never be with you.”

She flinched at his harsh words, but they needed to be told so that she would stop dreaming of him.

He moved past her. He knew what she offered, a night of tumbling in his fur. It was a great offer, to take his mind off Hannah, but it would only last a few minutes and he would be consumed with regrets. He walked and walked, until he sat by the river. The night was quiet, the party had stopped, with many in bed or fucking.

He felt so alone. All his life, he had lived to serve. And then Hannah had come into his life. She had showed him what love meant. She had made him want to protect her at every moment. And now he was alone.

He could not remember the last time he had cried. But in that moment, tears welled in his eyes.

He screamed loudly, into the night. A loud scream that carried over the village, and into the sky, startling the birds. Tears rolled down his eyes as he prayed to the gods to take the burden he felt away.

*

The horse led her home. As crazy as it was to say, the horse had taken charge as if pulled by some force, and had led her right home. One instance she had been soothing the horse, and the next several men gathered around her. Despite recognizing her, they looked at her with suspicion.

“Where’s he?” Hannah asked.

“You do not belong here,” Juh said, emerging from the men.

She rolled her eyes. And fixed him with a gaze. “I belong here. There’s nothing you can do to drive me away.”

They held a firm gaze for a minute and then he smiled. Perhaps the first time she would ever see him smile.

“You know where he’s,” the man said.

She wondered for a moment and figured it out. He was at the waterfall. She handed the wagon over to the men that took a faster horse. Too fast for her, she realized as they horse took to the wind, her

hair blowing.

She has travelled almost all through yesterday, and was tired, but she needed to be with him. She could feel the calling of his heart to her. She was nervous. About his reaction to her. Would he push her away? Did he hate her? All her worries would soon be answered.

She spotted Bear Claw's mare and stopped next to it. She got off the horse and smoothened her dress. Her hair was a scattered mess, and she had left her comb with the rest of her belongings.

This is it, she told herself as she looked around the beautiful terrain. She took a step forward.

She looked down at the flowing river. Seated beside it was Bear Claw. Her heart swelled with love for the man. Just a few days and she had missed him so much.

Quietly, she walked through the rocks. Her heart raced in excitement. The what ifs confused her.

Bear Claw froze at a faint sound. Someone was coming. He had come here to get away from the camp. To get some quiet. He didn't want to be disturbed by anyone.

"Go away," he said as the footsteps paused.

They continued. Towards him.

"I said go away!" His head flung towards the intruder. He gasped. He closed his eyes and opened them. She had to be a dream. He had to be sleeping because she couldn't be standing before him. What pleasure did the gods take in taunting him?

"Bear Claw," Hannah said softly.

His eyes lifted to her. The apparition sounded just like her.

"I am not an apparition," Hannah said, making him realize he had spoken out loud. "It is me. See..." she pinched herself and grimaced.

It was her? He staggered up, and she crossed the remaining distance between them, flinging herself into his arms. His arms tightened around her. She was real! He had no idea that tears were already rolling down his face. She was real! That was all he could think of.

He pulled away from her caressing her now wet face. He stared into her eyes. "You are real."

"Yes."

"You came back."

"I never should have left," Hannah said.

He crumbled her with another tight hug. He refused to let go. Her scent drifted to him, intoxicating him. He had missed her so much.

"I am sorry I left. I... Wanted to protect you. To protect the village. And I wanted to know how my mother fared," Hannah said in

a rush.

He understood her. He had thought a good deal with past day, with his sisters throwing some insight to why she may have left. He had taken her from her home to a strange land. Away from her people. He imagined the same being done to him. He would jump at the slightest opportunity to return to his kindred.

"All that matters is that you came back, that you are here with me," Bear Claw said. All was forgiven. She coming back was a surprise. He never expected this. He had thought he had lost her for good, but here she was in his arms. It seemed too good to be true he had to pinch himself to be sure that this was not a dream.

Hannah laughed. "This is not a dream. I am here with you Sachem. I am here."

"Why? Why did you come back?" She had wanted to be with her people, so why come back of her own will? He was elated to have her back but why....

Hannah smiled, looking up at him. "I came back because I love you."

His eyes widened at her words. Was he offended she wondered. Had she made a mistake? All her What ifs had gone with the wind when he embraced her.

"You love me?" His words came out in a whisper.

She nodded. "I do. I don't even know why I came back. I know you may want to be with someone like Anika. Or want me to be in your harem..." She glared at him as he burst into laughter. She was trying her best to muster words, and he was taking light of the situation.

"I don't have another woman," Bear Claw said. Yes, there were some chiefs with harems, but he had no interest in one. One woman was more than enough for him. "I don't want any one else but you Hannah. I love you."

It was her turn to be stunned. Her heart leapt in joy. He had no idea how happy his words had made her. She had come here with blind faith, fearing that he would turn her back. The man she loved, loved her? How could she ever have doubted him?

"Thank you for coming back. When you left, it was like I had been destroyed. I was unable to function. To survive. I wanted to come for you, but what if you did not want me?"

"I will always want you," Hannah smiled. She hugged him again, and noticed him stiffen. She pulled away from him and noticed the bruise on one arm. "What happened to you?" she asked with concern.

"A mountain lion injured me," Bear Claw said dismissively.

"A lion!" she screamed. How had that happened? She glared at

him. What had he done?

He looked away sheepishly. He felt embarrassed. "I was angry and went hunting," he simply said.

Now her hands were on her waist and she pushed at him playfully. "You could have gotten killed." She shuddered to think of him being killed by the wild animal. She would not have met him when she returned.

"I am sorry. I know better," Bear Claw said. What he had done was very stupid. If he had died, he would never get this chance to confess his feelings and be with Hannah. The gods were right, they knew better and made things fall in place in their own time.

She squealed as he lifted her up. Her legs wrapped around him as their lips met in a kiss. She had missed this. She had missed them being together in every way possible. She caressed his face and smiled.

"I am yours," Hannah said.

He growled in agreement. "You are mine."

They rode back home together. He refused to let go of her and so she sat in front of him, the other mare behind them.

She told him about her suspicions that Anika had given her up to the constable. He frowned. He had never expected her to do such a thing, but jealousy was a strong force that would push others to do harm. She had played innocent, meanwhile she had established ties somehow with the white devils. How much had she told them, or would she reveal to those people if they offered her gifts?

"I don't want anyone to get hurt," Hannah said, noticing his pensiveness.

"No one will," he assured her. Despite Anika's betrayal, she was still concerned about her. She had a beautiful heart.

The gates opened at their arrival. There was a cheer as they rode in. The people had come out to welcome them. He could not have been happier in that moment. These people had come to love and accept his woman. And he knew tonight, they would all swear allegiance to the woman he had chosen as his mate. For as long as she lived, they would protect her and not hurt her.

Hannah smiled as the children surrounded her chanting welcome greetings. She had missed the village. These wild yet peaceful lands had become her home. Deer Fawn came up to her and the ladies hugged.

"I knew you would come back," Deer Fawn said.

"She said you could not leave the chief, that you were in love with him," Black Bird said.

Hannah smiled. She had always been observant and had been right. How could she leave him when he was a part of her?

He came to her side and she could not help but be amused at how the ladies greeted him with respect. She respected him, but all these reminded her how powerful he was.

He pulled her to him and kissed her. A cheer of victory went up from the crowd. Hannah's face turned red while Bear Claw looked smug. In the presence of his people, he had shown her to them.

"My mate!" he announced with a loud voice that carried through all.

The people began to chant a native mating song, reserved for the chiefs. The chants flowed amongst the camp. Hannah leaned onto him and felt more content than she had felt in a very long time.

Tonight was another excuse for a feast. It was a night of celebration for the return of Hannah, and the smile that had returned to their chief's face. For he had chosen his mate, and she was deserving.

Hannah smiled as the women danced around the fire. She clapped and sang, word for word. Bear Claw was proud, she knew his language more than he thought. It was a gift to him, she said.

"She has left the village," Bear Claw informed her.

She knew who he was referring to. Anika. "Left?"

He nodded. "The men saw her leave through the gates a few minutes after we arrived. She went to her mother's clan."

As it should be. She faced a worse fate if she remained in the village for Bear Claw would unearth her betrayal and punish her. She was glad that the woman was far away from them and could not manipulate them.

She leaned onto him, feeling at peace as the songs grew louder. She smiled when he took her hand. The crowd seemed to part away for them. She smiled as he pulled her to him, his hand on her waist.

That night, in his teepee she moaned with passion as he kissed everywhere around her erect nipple. Her body thrust to him as he bit gently around her nipple.

"Please," she pleaded.

He obliged her by taking her nipple in his mouth. She gasped wanting more. She had missed him giving her pleasure.

He littered kisses lower and lower, until he hovered over her mound.

"Bear Claw," she said, anticipating his next move.

He grinned, as his tongue dipped into her. Her legs wrapped around him in bliss. His tongue went deeper as he spread her. She moaned above him, her eyes dimly watching him. A pulse went through her body, her back lifted as he toes arched. She fell back, taking slow breaths.

Then he plunged into her. He groaned at her tightness and

warmth. It felt so good to be sheathed in her. It was a feeling he could not explain.

“Hannah!” he called out her name as he thrust into her again.

She gasped, pushing against him as he fingers dug into him. “More, more,” she cried.

He pounded faster and faster into her. He pulled out as she screamed his name, his mouth covering her lips. The climax spread through her and her body went limp as he exploded inside her.

They both fell to the fur, covered in sweat. He pulled her to him possessively and said, “Mine.”

Hannah smiled contently. “Yours.”

Epilogue

Laughter rang through the air as the children played a game. The adults watched them, but they talked in serious but hushed tones.

Hannah sat next to her husband of three years. They had been married in the traditional ways of his people, in front of the village and in the presence of the spirits. The marriage had born a son, Small Spring, who favored the coloring of his father, and the eyes of his mother. He was doted on by all in the clan, but he was smart and intelligent, and he would make a strong warrior someday.

"I fear the rumors might be true," Juh said. In the past months, several fights had broken out between the white devils and the clans. For every action by any of the sides, there was a reaction. The white devils were adamant on getting the Indians out of their ancestral home. And the Indians would fight to the death to keep their lands and heritages. There had never been a time as now in their lives. Several tribes had been brought down either by the white devils or epidemics, with the people including children taken to the mines, never to be heard from again. He didn't know which fate was worse. It was sad to see his people died, but the spirits had said this would happen. Times were changing.

"It is time to move," Bear Claw said. They hadn't moved in over a decade. He had been scouting lands and there was one just by a waterfall. The land was fruitful, there was water and it had access to the forest for meat. The most important thing however was that it was protected by the rocks. It would keep intruders away, with enough time to attack. There was also a natural canal underneath they could hide if there were intruders.

Hannah placed a hand over her husband. Their marriage was not entirely bliss, but she would wish for nothing more. He hated the havoc her people caused and she wished there was a way to make things better. But each side treated the other with suspicion. She had decided her loyalty years ago and it was with Bear Claw and his people, even though a vast majority of her people couldn't understand why. The few times she went into the city, they looked at her in dismay. Her mother and siblings still lived there and they had become a part of their lives. Samuel had left, just as expected and her mother had moved on.

He placed a hand over her pregnancy bump. It was twins, a girl and a boy. That was what he had seen in a dream, a blessing from the spirits. The babies stirred and he smiled. Despite the sounds of drums,

he knew they would make it through. The village. He and Hannah. And their family. Their fates had been destined a long while ago before they were even conceived.

The little group soon dispersed leaving Bear Claw and his wife. He held her to him. She always gave him peace. He kissed her, while she stroked his hair in that slow manner that made him sleepy. He loved this woman, and he thanked the spirits every day for bringing her into his life.

Their little boy ran to them.

“Mama! Papa!” he said. “Tell me a story.”

“What story should I tell you?” Bear Claw asked the little boy that looked so much like him.

“The wise owl!” the boy said excitedly. It was a story he loved and had been told over and over again, at his request.

“What about I tell you about the story of how I met your mother long before I actually met her,” Bear Claw said.

“How is that possible?” Small Spring asked.

“It is very possible,” Hannah said, smiling next to him. Bear Claw had shared the story with her, and till today she was still in awe of how things had fallen in place for them. And so was their son as his eyes widened in excitement.

“Tell me! Tell me!” the boy said.

And so, Bear Claw told his son of his dreams with his mate next to him holding his hand.

Letter to Readers

Hello Readers,

I hope you all have enjoyed Apache Sun. This is the first book in Native Sun series. I have been asked why did I decide to write this story. Well to answer that It's

because I don't see color in people and I believe Love sees none either. I believe that in history there was alot of forbiddin love stories that were not told. People that loved each other but because of culture or color they were not allowed to love each other. That is what has inspired this story.

I love you all and I thank you all for the support you have gave me. Please take a moment to leave a review where you

purchased this book. Reviews are the easiest way to say thank you to an author.

Until the next book,
Christine

About The Author

Christine Clinton

Christine Clinton lives in northern Oklahoma. She is happily married for 30 years with 4 adult children and 6 grandchildren. Christine writes from the grassy plains of their 55-acre homestead. For years she has been full of stories ready to share with the world. Read along as she captivates readers with her invigorating romance novels.